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The Subject(s) of Feminism:
Gender Identity, Emotion, and Deconstruction
in Contemporary Feminist Politics

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Thesis for Departmental Honors of Political Science
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Abstract

The way we think, understand, and speak about gender is *changing*. In 2019, more people than ever are identifying as nonbinary or gender fluid. Feminism as theory and as political practice has long assumed the subject of ‘women’ as its primary and *essential* subject, but the issues and subjects that feminism speaks for are not necessarily self-identified or even *percieved* as ‘women.’ Through analyzing influential feminist works and thinkers, I aim to elucidate the identitarian comitment of canonical feminsim, and to offer an alternative to the politics of feminism as *always* grounded in the subject of ‘women.’ My thesis develops four central approaches for a feminist politics that is attentive to a plurality of subjects: 1) examining the *connective tissue* of emotions and experiences to better grapple with how subjects are constructed, 2) *opening* the category of ‘women’ to resignification and new associations, 3) decentralizing ‘women’ as the *primary* and *sole* subject of feminsim, and 4) taking a post-structural approach to grapple with the constructed and conditional nature of ‘women,’ and all subjects.

Preface

The debate on what constitutes gender, what constitutes *woman*, is implicitly important for feminism, as feminism has historically relied on, and been associated with, the gendered-subject of women. Theories differ widely across feminist discourse about how to encapsulate the experiences of women who are oppressed by patriarchal power on a sexual or gender basis, but what has also ranged and transformed over time is feminism’s definition of ‘women’ as the subject of its politics. Much of feminist theory relies on being able to use the

word 'woman' as the grounding subject connoting an identifiable social location within society, and within patriarchy. To discuss the injustices that occur systematically against women, feminism has historically required a definitive description of 'women,' in order to indicate *who* these injustices occur onto. For feminist politics to fight for the emancipation of subordinated subjects, must feminism be grounded in a defined and fixed category of identification *of women*? If the outlines and definition of the female subject are undecidable, "how can we ground a feminist politics that deconstructs the female subject?" (Alcoff 1988, p. 419). In "The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," Linda Alcoff quotes Biddy Martin, arguing that absolving the category of woman due to an "abstract theoretical correctness... could make the question of women's oppression obsolete," (Alcoff 1988, p. 419). How can feminist politics understand gender as deconstructed while still taking up the question of women's oppression? What would a feminist politics that isn't grounded in the subject of 'women' look like?

Now more than ever, people are more likely to reject gender binaries, or to identify as genderqueer. The increasing fluidity of gender identities has been taken up both socially and legally by means of de-essentializing gender given at birth, and relocating gender as something performative, unfixed, and grounded in self-identification. The question of how feminism can proceed without centering the subject of women is particularly relevant in 2019, when 'women' as a category is socially expanding to encapsulate more diverse bodies and experiences. The identity of 'woman' is also resisted in some cases, by people who are subject to being socially categorized as a 'woman' due to their embodiment or expression of cultural norms historically associated with 'women.' Political movements around reproductive control, gender discrimination, and bodily autonomy are movements that can no longer be solely identified as

“women’s movements” alone, because it is not only women who have a personal stake in these movements. Gender-fluid people, nonbinary people, trans people, people whose lives are shaped by sexual subordination, people who are denied bodily autonomy: these are groups who are excluded from feminism when ‘women’ are assumed to be the primary subject of feminist movements.

GLAAD’s “Accelerating Acceptance 2017” survey stated that “acceptance of LGBTQ people has reached historic levels, particularly among Millennials.” The survey found that “12% of Millennials identify as transgender or gender nonconforming, meaning they do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth or their gender expression is different from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity,” (Accelerating Acceptance 2017, p. 3). The revolution of genderqueer-ness is likely due to widespread “increased cultural understanding and acceptance,” as well as the explosion of internet communities, new technologies, and post-structural thought. The increasing social validity of identifying as genderqueer is a cumulative movement, building off of the increasing popularity and access to genderqueer representation in the media and public sphere. Because of all this progress in moving away from the gender binary, “young people are now more likely to openly identify as LGBTQ while also rejecting traditional labels and seeing the world in terms that are beyond a binary,” (Accelerating Acceptance 2017, p. 7).

We have developed new ways to think and speak about gender, which has been liberatory in many ways for people who experience gender dysphoria, for people who are transgender, and for people who do not identify within the man/woman binary of gender. Though this gender-identity politics has been emancipatory and invaluable, gender fluidity also complicates

the historical project of feminism, which has relied on a knowable, fixed, and locatable subject of ‘women.’ The concept of ‘woman’ has become a problem for feminist discourse due to disagreements on how the term can, or should, be applied and defined in varying sociocultural contexts. With the fluidity of gender making null the fixed boundaries of women’s subjectivity, there is a threat to how a political movement could even discuss the plight of women, as deconstruction “threatens to dissipate us and our projects as it... disintegrates the coherence of women as a collective subject,” (Brown 1995, p. 39). Vital voices *have been* and *are* excluded from feminism due to the rigid fixity of defining women and women’s experiences as the primary and essential subjects of feminism. How can feminism proceed with a politics capable of acknowledging the multiplicity of women’s needs, but also how these needs are not specific to women alone? How can feminist politics still engage in resisting the oppression of women, when grounding feminist politics in the fixed subject of ‘woman’ produces factionalization, Eurocentrism, and wound culture, instead of a politics of solidarity? I argue for a feminist politics of emotion, a feminist politics that both decentralizes and opens the subject of ‘women,’ and a feminist politics of deconstruction. These four approaches are integral for a feminist politics capable of taking up gender discrimination in a moment where gender is more fluid than it has ever been.

Part I

Rethinking Feminism in a Gender Nonconforming Age

The understanding of “women” as the subject of feminism has been a conceptual norm for many academics and persons for much of the 20th century. To many thinkers, the “defining

feature of feminist theories has been their grounding in women's experience," (Hunter 1996, p. 135). The conceptualization of a "women's experience" has been thought to be "a basis for feminist politics," a distinctive sense of women's liberation being *the*, or at least the primary, goal of feminist movements (Hunter 1996, p. 135). It is often assumed that women are the primary subject of feminism, but that feminism may *also* include issues of race, sexuality, and/or class. Thus, "women" are often the assumptive subject of feminist works, unless explicitly stated otherwise, based for many off the understanding that "women are usually the subject of feminist history," (Hunter 1996, p. 135). Grounding feminist analyses around a conceptual framework of the liberation of 'women' fails to account for how women are configured in relation to social factors beyond the realm of gender.

Exploring how 'women' have been understood and articulated as a category that encapsulates a myriad of persons with shared attributes, helps us understand the historical connective tissue of feminist theory and politics. Feminism has deployed and relied on the identity of 'women' as the connective tissue that *holds together* the category of feminist theory. By "connective tissue," I mean what compels people to join in solidarity and coalitional resistance, the externally recognized and acknowledged instrumental qualities generated between people that stimulate feelings of trust, support, and a cultivated knowledge of tethered experiences and hopes. Defining who 'women' are has been inextricably linked to defining the politics and aspirations of feminism; feminist politics shift depending on the lived experiences and cultural effects it is attentive to.

I will explore how feminist discourse has attempted to describe the category of 'women,' or to locate the factors that *make someone* a woman. I explore essentialism in two veins;

biological essentialism, and experiential essentialism. Essentialism is the understanding that “a collection of individuals constitutes a kind that is defined by a common and unique property (or properties),” (Witt 2011, p. 5). Biological essentialism seeks to establish either reproductive or anatomical properties as what qualifies an individual as a woman. Experiential essentialism seeks to establish the properties of ‘women’ by the social experiences of women. I will discuss work by theorists such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who locate the shared characteristic of all women as occupying subordinated positionalities due to their gendered and/or sexed bodies. Exploring gender essentialism is crucial to understanding how feminist politics in our current moment are *inhibited* by relying and insisting on a fixed subject (women) in order to ground feminist politics.

I will discuss the views of ‘cultural feminism,’ a term borrowed from Linda Alcoff, which says women have a shared ‘essence,’ which is grounded in either reproductive capacities or social behaviors. This is a mode of experiential essentialism, but it has ties to biological essentialism in that this ‘essence’ is rooted in having a female body. I explore cultural feminism in order to locate the professed ‘essence’ of women, where cultural feminism fails to acknowledge the constructed character of feminized subjects, and also where cultural feminism actually reinforces the concept of a natural, inherent gender identity, which serves to position women in accordance to the ideals of who ‘women’ are, or should be, notions of ‘women’ that are enforced and maintained by patriarchal structures of dominance. Though cultural feminism asserts a type of reclamation politics by hoping to destigmatize values that have been historically been associated with women, (i.e. caregiving, emotional intelligence, nurturing), this method of experiential essentialism fails to imagine a conception of ‘woman,’ nor a subject of feminism,

that is not solely produced and defined by *the effects* of patriarchal power, which regulates, categorizes, and associates ‘women’ with specific virtues in order to claim an inevitable and natural division of social and political power due to gender difference.

Some have argued that feminist politics cannot survive without a claim to an interpretable subject, like theorist Linda Alcoff who argues that “the concept of woman is a problem” for feminists and feminist ideology alike, because “the concept and category of woman is the necessary point of departure for any feminist theory and feminist politics,” yet the question of what defines women has either been assumed, or set aside (Alcoff 1988, p. 405). I argue that the category of ‘women’ is not the necessary point of departure for feminist politics or feminist theory, but rather that the category of ‘women’ should be *taken up* by feminist theorists as a contestable, shifting, and always re-situated identity. I also argue that using the identity category of ‘women’ to ground a politics is less useful than a politics grounded in solidarity, a politics of resistance, of both sharing and witnessing, of relation *between* and *among* identities.

What could feminism become if we allowed “the concept of woman” to be a rich arena for understanding how gender functions, instead of the problem that Linda Alcoff suggests it is? I argue it is important for feminist theory to retain the grasp on the role of identity in analyses of the present, but I also assert that the deconstruction of ‘women’ offered by post-structuralist feminist theory is not necessarily an attempt to ‘do away’ with analyzing the tangible and emotional affects of identification. I will move to discuss the work of post-structural feminist theories from Judith Butler and Denise Riley in order to examine the constructive nature and performativity of gender, creating a deeper understanding the temporality, location, and embodiment of being a woman that is de-essentialized from both the body, and from any notion

of an internal or naturalized gender ‘essence.’ Grappling with the deconstructed subject of ‘woman’ has positive consequences for feminism, of understanding and unpacking the role of social and political institutions in determining our identities.

Beyond deconstructing the identity of ‘woman,’ feminism would benefit from distinguishing itself from *a politics of identity*. Identity politics are insufficient as a political praxis, because this politics fails to recognize that the sameness or overlap of identities *does not* beget a shared commitment to a political movement or ideology. Feminism is suffering an identity crisis, but this crisis will birth new ways of being in the world, new commonalities, new communities, new ways of connection that are built around viewpoints, political desires, and the connective tissues of experience and emotion.

My Approach

I will analyze influential feminist theories that have attempted to resolve the debate on who ‘women’ are, and thus position a feminist politics that is grounded in either the biological essentialism of women, or the experiential essentialism of women. It is important to think about how feminists have thought about these debates around ‘identity’ in order to understand our contemporary moment. The question of ‘women’ has been taken up before, and it is important to understand how feminist politics have been situated in accordance to these definitions, because feminist politics is *currently situated* due to work of these canonical feminists, among others.

Identities are important to people: they are *meaningful*. While this meaning is applied, as opposed to inherent, identities have a profound impact on people’s lived experiences, how we make sense of our place in the world, and how we relate to each other. Though identity is prescriptive, constructed, and culturally contingent, identity also is a meaningful tool to

understand *how we are produced as subjects*, a production that is constant, never complete, and always embedded in how we make sense of ourselves. Feminism should retain the investment of grappling with how identities are produced, and how they produce us. To investigate how a feminist politics can take up gender fluidity is imperative to feminism's emancipatory potential, and is an essential task for feminism's affective political impact.

I hope to elucidate the relentless identitarian commitment of feminist theory of the past, because I hope to profess a feminism that is not restricted to 'women' as its subject. The task of defining 'women' cannot and should not be closed. Feminism cannot proceed as a politics of identity, nor a politics grounded in the subject of 'woman.' This ground is unstable, this ground is a shape-shifter, this ground is invested in its own subordination, this ground is not universal, this ground cannot speak, alone, for a politics of resistance. Feminism mustn't necessitate boundaries between sexed and gendered categories in order to be a political movement that organizes in resistance against the subordination of feminized subjects, of vulnerable subjects, of subordinated subjects.

In this thesis, I will be unpacking four central approaches for contemporary feminism in a society of increasing gender fluidity: a renewed understanding of connective tissues and how the politics of emotion construct our experiences and identities; opening the subject of 'women' to resignification and qualities; decentralizing the subject of 'women' within feminist politics to focus instead on contingent feminisms with a plurality of subjects; an investment in feminist consciousness; and a turn to movements over identity to ground feminist politics.

Connective Tissues of Emotion and Experience

I hope to understand how feminist politics can operate from a more multivariable conception of woman*ness*. I hope to prove that there are connective tissues among women that can serve as a platform for feminism, tissues that avoid exclusionary requirements of biology or innate essence. These connective tissues that produce group consciousness can be located by looking at Sara Ahmed's work of feminist constructive nature through how emotions move through, and form, the subject of 'women.' In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed explores how emotions circulate in the form of economies, sticking and becoming signifiers of specific subjects, as well as bonding and providing a basis for solidarity on commonly shared grounds. How women are read as 'emotional' in some contexts provides an interesting basis for discussing the role that emotions play in how we make sense of our own identities, and the identities of others. Ahmed's work professes a category of women to be *emotionally constructed*, both in how people self-identify as women, and in how one perceives or locates an 'other' as a woman.

Opening the Category of 'Women' to Resignification

I argue for a feminist politics that works to destabilize the category of 'women' by opening that identity up to resignification, varied associations, and a plurality of bodies. Allowing the category of 'women' to be up for debate, always, serves to open up feminism to a plurality of subordinated subjects. Feminism should allow the term of 'women' to remain open, to never be fixed in relation to a subordinated status, nor an anatomical makeup.

Decentralizing the Subject: A Focus and Endorsement of Contingent Feminisms

If any assumed universal traits of women are racist, classist, and heteronormative, is there a salvageable category of 'women' to carry with us into future theorizing if we are also fighting for to strip feminism of its white supremacy, heteronormativity, and disregard for how women's

experiences vary across socioeconomic position and cultural location? It seems that “in many contexts, 'women' are too heterogeneous to be treated as a unitary group,” (Hunter 1996, 156). The task of mitigating our discourse to avoid totalizing any theory is a positive trajectory for intersectional feminism. Perhaps there should be no ‘feminism,’ only *feminisms*, a network of alliances to alleviate subordination that occurs through various apparatuses on our gendered and sexed beings. Resistance to patriarchal oppression will be best enacted when actual connective tissues of subordinated femininity are elucidated, and subjected to constant re-phrasing and conceptualizing.

Feminist Consciousness: A Turn to Movements Over Identity

I argue that the discussions on deconstructing the subject of ‘women’ are important for feminism, but I also intervene to describe a plurality of connectivities among and around women that offer a feminist group-consciousness with which to connect, weave, and ground a feminist politics on the basis of a deeper understanding of how subordinated subjects are constructed and exist in the world. Feminism needs tethering, not grounding, to be focused not through a fixed subject, but to be focused on collectives of emotion, material ties, and the deconstruction of historical prefigurements of identity. The language of ‘grounding’ insinuates a stabilization, or a fixed point of tangible reference. Feminism should adopt a practice that is not grounded, but *tethered*, as tethered requires multiple points of reference at differing locations. In order to open the subject of feminism, I want to review how the subject has been closed in canonical feminist theory, by rigid and exclusionary definitions of ‘women’ as the *natural* subject of feminism.

Part II

Literature Review: Gender Essentialisms

The reason that I am addressing essentialism is to understand how women have problematically been defined in a way that limits political possibilities for women, and limits the possibilities for feminist politics. I will be looking at biological gender essentialism and experiential gender essentialism to understand how feminist theory has attempted to construct women, and *what kind of feminist politics* arise from these constructions.

Biological essentialism

Biological essentialism is the oldest school of thought in understanding gender, and is thus the most instantiated, ingrained, and widely spread theory of how gender *works*. Biological essentialism is the theory that our biology (the physical body) is a reliable determinant or explanation for how people are socially identified and understood; it is the theory that individuals have a baseline of physical construction that results in how they behave, are treated, and where they are located within society. Biological *gender* essentialism argues that behavioral and social differences, gender roles, and differing social locations between genders are all caused by the inherent, material, and pre-political characteristics of their bodies. Biological gender essentialism also promotes a cisgender universalism of “women”; it is the theory that one’s biology dictates one’s gender, with a correspondence of male sex organs to “man,” and female sex organs to “woman.”

The social condition of being a woman thus originates with having female anatomy, and women are oppressed in social, political, and personal sphere *through* their bodies; subordination of women is enacted through regulation and control of women’s sexual, maternal, and female body.

One of the most essential feminist texts that relies on biological essentialism is Adrienne Rich's "Of Woman Born." For Rich, the role of "the mother" is a connective tissue among all women, thus grounding her feminist politics in a material and biological conception of 'women.' Rich relies on an implicitly-cisgendered woman as a subject, which enables her to show how women with female anatomy across cultures interact differently to the two meanings of motherhood she defines: first, "*potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction" and second, the *institution* "which aims at ensuring that that potential - and all women - shall remain under male control," (Rich 1997, p. 13). Thus, biological potential to reproduce as a mother is a tool utilized and controlled by patriarchal supremacy, configuring women's oppression by men, at least in part, as due to bodily and reproductive possibility.

Sprung from essentialism have come universal claims of joint, reproductive sufferings due to woman's "female" anatomy, a female anatomy that shapes and dictates the lives of women, as "the female generative organs... have become a prime target of patriarchal technology," (Rich 1997, p. 127). Biological reproduction is configured by Rich as the material means with which women are controlled, through systemic and societal investments in the institution of motherhood. Rich argues that the womb has historically been "made into a source of powerlessness" for the purposes of "transfiguring and enslaving woman," (Rich 1997, p. 68).

The material presence of the womb is what subjects a woman to powerlessness *as a* woman. Rich points to de Beauvoir's argument that "It was as Mother that woman was fearsome; it is in maternity that she must be transfigured and enslaved," (de Beauvoir 1952, p. 171). Both authors localize women's subordination in how social, political, and medical institutions seek to exclude, transfigure, and enslave women *by proxy of their reproductive and biological*

capacities. Rich says that if “rape has been terrorism, then motherhood has been penal servitude,” (Rich 1997, p. 14). This analogy describes how the female body is the site, symbol, and receptacle of women’s oppression. As women are oppressed, they are oppressed through their lack of sovereignty over their own reproduction, which also denies women sovereignty of their bodies and lives.

This biological gender essentialism offers a navigable feminist politics for the emancipation of women. By defining women within their biological makeup, feminist politics thus are oriented towards a politics of investment in women’s bodily sovereignty, mobility, and access to public and political spaces, and such a politics is reactive to barriers that restrict women’s bodies. The institution of motherhood hardly offers an entirely comprehensive site for women’s subordination, but it is one of the threads that traverses the cluster of gender: Some women are oppressed in response to their reproductive capacities, but other women are oppressed because of their deviations from the norms of motherhood, or for having male sex organs while identifying as female.

Creating a politics around anatomy further subjects women to being associated with and delimited to their anatomy. It is important to de-hierarchize reproductive rights within feminist politics, because reproductive rights are not a coherent or universal signifier of women’s struggle, nor of the feminist struggle. Patriarchal power operates not just on women’s delegation to the role of mother, but also to the role of wife, daughter, sex object, woman in the workforce, etc. The overemphasis on the role that motherhood plays in women’s oppression severely underestimates the reach of patriarchal power, which extends to control and oppress women further beyond their reproductive capacity. Just as feminist political thinkers like Rich are

resisting biological essentialism in arguing that gender subordination is not a natural or inherent consequence of gender difference, they also *rely* on the premise that gender difference is essential, inherent and fixed due to biological difference. A conception of women as tied to their biology, and therefore their reproductive capacity, falters as a functional ground for feminist politics because this conception *refuses to articulate women outside of their anatomical existence*. Not all women have uteri, not all women are able to reproduce, and a portion of the people who possess the ability to give birth are not women. Simply, not all women experience reproductive subordination, and many people who do are not women. Assuming that women are oppressed because of their association with motherhood is an incomplete picture of how women are subordinated by the multifacets of patriarchal power, and this analysis overemphasizes reproduction both in the lives of women, and as a determining factor of womanhood. A majority of women in the world have reproductive potential and are thus controlled and subordinated through patriarchal control of this capacity, which I argue can be maintained as *a*, but not *the* connective tissue between women and Mothers, because though these identities are at times concurrently embodied, *neither category necessitates the other*. Resistance to the harmful institutionalization of motherhood, and how mothers are oppressed and subordinated is an important project for feminism, but it is surely not *the grounds* for feminism. Contesting and promoting women's authority and domain as mothers is an important strand of feminist praxis, but this tissue is connective among a plurality of bodies, and it is not connective for all women.

In "A Note on Anger," Marilyn Frye importantly notes that the extension of women's ability to advocate justice, anger, and autonomy within the role of the mother "represents only a small shift in the concept of Woman. Historically and logically it was an extension of our right to

mother,” (Frye 1983, p. 92). To interrogate the right of the mother would be to assault one of the few roles in which women are given and *denied* sovereignty in patriarchal society, but it is not within these bounds exclusively that feminist politics should advocate for sovereignty of women. Articulating women’s rights *as* mothers rights re-instantiates women’s inevitable and assigned role as a caretaker, nurturer, and conserver. A reproductive feminist politics limits feminist politics that do not speak from the socially-accepted position of ‘woman as mother.’ Biological gender essentialism is a limited and contradictory model for identifying the subject of feminism, because centralizing the discussion of ‘women’s rights *as* mothers’ is limited to pre-accepted and pre-stratified norms of how women should be, and who women are.

Experiential Essentialism

Experiential gender essentialism defines women not in their biology, but in their social experience of subordination under patriarchy, where women’s subjectivity is configured by men and patriarchal power. I turn to Catharine MacKinnon in order to explain experiential essentialism, where MacKinnon “locates women's essence in the social realm. For her, the defining fact about women is that they are socially subordinated, primarily through the appropriation of their sexuality.” (Hunter 1996, p. 137). In the system of patriarchy, ‘women’ are wholly constructed by their “collective social history of disempowerment, exploitation and subordination extending to the present,” (MacKinnon 1991, p. 15). MacKinnon emphasizes the distinct social experience of women as a ground for the group consciousness of women. For MacKinnon, being treated *as a woman* is “to refer to this diverse and pervasive concrete material

reality of social meanings and practices,” and “to be disadvantaged in these ways incident to being socially assigned to the female sex,” (MacKinnon 1991, p. 15-16).

MacKinnon’s notion of a “social experience” that aligns individuals into the category of women relies on a notion of socially distinguishable gender cues, of first being able to *interpret* someone as a woman in order to *treat* them as a woman. MacKinnon’s theory also works to draw large patterns of globalized patriarchal domination, which exists and acts upon women to different degrees depending on their positionality within social strata. Describing the treatment of women is “to describe the realities of women's situation,” which though cannot be universalized as ‘the same’ for all women, women’s situation as subordinate parallels across social dimensions of race and class to describe oppressions of sexual degradation, sexual harassment, the demeaning of feminized labor, unequal compensation as male counterparts within mirroring racial and economic strata, as well as dehumanization (MacKinnon 1991, p. 15).

Andrea Dworkin is another canonical and influential feminist thinker who utilizes experiential gender essentialism. In the book *Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality*, as well as in much of her other work, Dworkin too describes women as defined by their subordination, but she locates this subordination in the gendered violence of pornography:

It (Pornography) sexualizes inequality and in doing so creates discrimination as a sex-based practice.

It permeates the political condition of women in society by being the substance of our inequality however located-in jobs, in education, in marriage, in life.

It is women, kept a sexual underclass, kept available for rape and battery and incest and prostitution.

It is what we are under male domination; it is what we are for under male domination.

It is the heretofore hidden (from us) system of subordination that women have been told is just life.

Under male supremacy, it is the synonym for what being a woman is, (Dworkin 1985, p. 10).

Dworkin understands pornography as a site, culmination, and manifestation of women's subjectivity, implicitly built into the power structures and dynamics of the industry of pornography. Dworkin's analysis of pornography is limited to pornography that has an assumed male viewer of the female body or of the sexual act, an assumed heterosexual-male perspective of power dynamics, and an assumed replication of the gender discrimination that is rampant in contemporary (and past) society. Dworkin also conceptualizes the creation of the subject of women as being formed through denigration and subordination, as "the creation of a sexual dynamic in which the putting-down of women, the suppression of women, and ultimately the brutalization of women, is what sex is taken to be," (Dworkin 1985, p. 9). If pornography is an institution that creates women through dynamics of subordination, then the application of the subject "woman" does not necessarily need to apply only to female bodies.

What useful material I gather from Dworkin and MacKinnon's arguments are the villainization of the feminine, the collapsing of categories of the weak and overpowered with the category of women. Pornography is a reflection of naturalized gender dynamics, where women are configured as those who are dominated, exposed, and exploited. What would Dworkin's analysis of pornography offer the photos of sexual and physical abuse committed by U.S. soldiers at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison? The sexualization of inequality and of power dynamics is not limited to female bodies or women subjects, but permeates across the bodies of prisoners, queer people, and non-white persons who live in white-dominated societies. Sexual subordination and the manipulation of bodies by dominant groups is in no way specific to the

identities of man and woman, but works rather as a script that can slide from context to context, where power differences lie. The prisoners at Abu Ghraib were abused, raped, and dehumanized, and many of these acts were documented and distributed. If pornography is an institution that causes the affects of pleasure at the witnessing of subordination, it is in no way “a synonym for what a woman is,” as Dworkin professes it is. Sexual subordination and abuse manifest in locations of pre-existing power dynamics, between prison guards and prisoners, priests and parish boys, men and women... To divorce sexual subordination from the *condition of* being a woman would serve feminist theory to navigate a more comprehensive and inclusive analysis of how sexual subordination is weaponized and deployed in pre-existing power dynamics.

In response to the assertions of women as connected due to mutual subordination from masculine forces, what *else* are women? How are women shaped by emotions, by material objects, by their community and social positioning? Deploying subordination as the definitive marker of ‘women’ is a troubling base for feminist politics. If we reject this ontological base for women, we then also concede that subordination alone is not what then defines ‘women.’ Unified only through their designation to a subordinated group, ‘women’ would not exist if they didn’t occupy these subordinate positions, so configuring identity this way limits women’s capacity to avoid subordination *while still remaining a woman*.

The Problem with Defining Women in Terms of Subordination

Experiential essentialism must also reconcile the political implications of designating “subordinate positioning” as the ontological base of women, which serves to ideologically position and reposition women *as* subordinate. For thinkers like Jacques Derrida, identifying

within the binary structure of gender (as a woman) does not subvert the “dichotomous hierarchy” *essential* to the division of genders (Alcoff 1988, p. 417). This argument is also clear in Alcoff’s synopsis of post-structuralist thinkers like Foucault, who rejects the investments in identity by “oppositional subjects,” because such investments “merely recreate and sustain the discourse of power,” that constructed the identities as oppositional in the first place (Alcoff 1988, p. 418).

One of the most compelling interventions in feminist politics grounded in the subject of ‘women’ is Wendy Brown’s essay “Wounded Attachments.” For Brown, the act of claiming marginalized and/or oppressed identities is problematically tethered to the structures of domination that seek to maintain the subordination of women and/or marginalized identities. This argument disrupts the premise of the experiential essentialism, specifically the essentialism utilized by thinkers like Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who choose to deploy a feminist politics grounded in women’s identity *as* subordinated subjects. Women’s “wounded attachment” to the identity of ‘women’ is hypothesized by Brown as an *investment* in the continued subordination of women. Making a claim to an oppressed identity re-substantiates the subject *as* oppressed. In Brown’s argument, a subject making an identity-based political claim is susceptible to further subjugating themselves by claiming status and recognition in “categories such as race or gender that emerged and circulated as terms of power to enact subordination,” (Brown 1995, p. 55). I push Brown’s argument to further specificity, that it is the conflation of the injury and the identity that does the work of making this attachment wounded, rather than simply the identification within subordinated categories. Political action grounded in one’s claim to an injured identity maintains an investment in *the very conditions that made the injury possible*. This produces results that contradict the feminisms emancipatory intentions. This

paradox requires that women find liberation not through claiming *injury as identity*, but rather through articulating a desired future based off of what is denied or absent from the present. Brown asks “what kind of political recognition can identity-based claims seek... that will not resubordinate a subject itself historically subjugated through identity, through categories such as race or gender that emerged and circulated as terms of power to enact subordination?” (Brown 1995, p. 55). Brown makes this argument among a chorus of other theorists considered to be postmodern and/or poststructuralist feminists; Julia Kristeva, Denise Riley, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida... the list goes on. These theorists argue that claims to a subjectivity of ‘woman’ actually *further* the very subordination and denigration that feminist politics hopes to alleviate. While I agree that articulating oneself as subordinated has different effects than articulating a desired future for politics, I also acknowledge the limitations of Brown’s theory of “Wounded Attachments,” limitations that inadequately recognize the *difference* between a feminist politics that conflates injury and identity, and a feminist politics of recognizing injuries that occur onto persons because of how they are located within the sociocultural matrix of identity. If feminist politics wants to be attentive to the experiences of oppressed peoples, experiences of injury will remain as an integral aspect of collective healing and grievances, and motivating a politics of resistance. Speaking about injury is a contestation of the conditions of the world, and feminist politics can take up the politics of injury by understanding that these experiences of injury are not specific or limited to women, and therefore injury and sexual subordination are not *the defining factors* of being a woman, even if many women experience them.

Cultural Feminism

Subordination and biology are not the only ways feminist thinkers have attempted to define 'women.' I borrow the term "cultural feminism" from Linda Alcoff's work "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory." Cultural feminism is another mode of gender essentialism, which defines 'woman' by reclaiming (from men) women's right to define themselves. Within cultural feminism, there has been an effort to define 'feminine' virtues as correctly attributed to women, but wrongfully denigrated to be useless or weak virtues. Alcoff discusses cultural feminists such as Adrienne Rich, who rejects biological reductionism, yet insists on a "female consciousness" which she grounds in biological factors like body parts and menstruation. Thus, women are not reduced to their physical and bodily level as totalizing explanation of who women are, which would be a reductionist claim. The female essences described by Rich are both experiential and biological, but *the experiential cannot exist without the biological in these theoretical frameworks*. The female consciousness relies on an understanding of women's body as cisgender, reproductive, and able-bodied.

Promoting a conception of an innate female essence serves to preserve how women have been formed due to conditions of patriarchal domination, thus preserving the effects of domination, and deeming these effects "innate" to women. To the extent a concrete feminine essence "reinforces essentialist explanations" of the attributes of nurturing, peacefulness, and caregiving to women, these theories are "in danger of solidifying an important bulwark for sexist oppression: the belief in an innate 'womanhood' to which we must all adhere lest we be deemed either inferior or not 'true' women," (Alcoff 1988, p. 414). This discourse is trans-exclusionary, impractically universalized, and deeply steeped in reproductive essentialism. Alcoff summarizes cultural feminisms as being grounded in, and creating, an "essentialist response to misogyny and

sexism through adopting a homogeneous, unproblematized, and ahistorical conception of woman,” (Alcoff 1988, p. 413.) We must also grapple with the oppressive conditions that produce seemingly ‘innate’ traits among some women, conditions such as “forced parenting, lack of physical autonomy, dependency for survival on mediation,” (Alcoff 1988, p. 414). Claiming traits of nurturing and caregiving as innate to women further justifies the gendered division of labor that categorizes women as naturally dispositioned for childcare, emotional labor, and peace-keeping. Cultural feminist politics attempt to destigmatize historically associated feminine characteristics, but they advocate for the reclamation of these characteristics by claiming them essential to women’s nature, rather than grappling with how these behaviors are illicit, enforced, and assumed in women. This descriptive account of the essence of ‘woman’ is an incoherent and inaccurate ground for feminist consciousness to build off.

Instead of deploying a descriptive account of women’s subjectivity, I argue for a feminist politics that deploys a deconstructive account of women’s subjectivity. Alcoff’s intervention of cultural feminism is that this theory problematically essentializes the effects of patriarchy as inherent to women. In studying how patriarchy affects feminized bodies, both cultural and experiential essentialism have problematically limited their subjects to the category of ‘women.’ I protest against a feminist politics of identity, insofar as ‘identity’ is assumed to be the connective tissue of the feminist movement. I hope to employ a deconstructive method that de-essentializes the effects of patriarchy from the subject of ‘women,’ but still maintains an analysis for how these effects become integrated into sociocultural schemas of gender difference.

The Deconstructive Approach of Post-structural Feminism

The post-structural intervention in feminist theory is to define women as entirely socially constructed, that there are no inherent or essential traits of gender. 'Woman' is produced as a sexed object, a cultural construct, and as a set of ideals to be performed. One of the most prominent thinkers in post-structural feminism is Judith Butler, who in *Gender Trouble* describes that discursive terrain that constructs the category of "woman." Butler points to the discursive structure of gender as a force that "produces reality-effects that are eventually misperceived as 'facts'" (Butler 1992, p. 115). Butler uses de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman" to suggest that "woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end," (Butler 1992, p. 45). For Butler, gender has no *telos* of embodiment, but is established and performed through "regulatory practices" that produce binary categories of sex and gender (Butler 1992, p. 44).

For Butler, 'gender' has no essential characteristics, nor does the word 'woman,' accurately encapsulate any one group of individuals. To the degree that gender is 'real,' this conception of 'realness' is sustained on maintaining a 'knowable' world, a 'nameable' world, a taxonomic organization of individuals based on shared characteristics, capabilities, and behavior. Natalie Stoljar's analysis of transgender character Venus Xtravaganza in *Paris is Burning* reveals how subjects like Xtravaganza exemplify "people of indeterminate biological sex to whom the common-sense concept of woman clearly applies due to their behaviors, clothes, make-up, sexuality, hair, body shape, etc," (Stoljar 1995, p. 273). This argument denaturalizes sex from gender and de-essentializes the category of 'women' as 'people with female bodies.' Thus, the oppression of feminized subjects does not circulate in a way that touches only female bodies, but also bodies that represent and replicate a concept of 'womanness,' of pertaining to and

identifying with women as an idealized concept, thus denoting participation and existence within the social-class of ‘women.’

The irresolute and fluctuating embodiment of an idealized, normative ‘realness’ is the grid by which individuals assess their own (and others’) existence, or ‘realness.’ ‘Realness’ comes with a burden of proof, of performing and embodying an identity that may or may not maximize one’s ability to survive and/or thrive in a world where power (access and/or control of resources) is often distributed among racial, gender and class-based groups. Realness does not solely appear on the surface of our bodies, nor the configuration of our bodies; ‘realness’ is created in the perceptions that others have of us, and the relativity of our identity to others in approximate locations.

This argument is anti-essentialist in its acknowledgement of the malleability and temporality of gender; at times, and in certain spaces, the body becomes aware of its gendered dimensions. The awareness of one’s gender and the sociocultural consequences that come with it need not be restricted to such temporality; the effects of gender oppression on the individual are not contingent upon being either “in and out of the eye of ‘the social,’” (Riley 2003, p. 103). A body resisting the ultimate definitive state of “woman” is not a condition for avoiding being *treated* or *perceived* as a woman in a totalizing manner. The social categorization of gender is temporal and transitory, but the subjection and ‘other’-ing of some bodies and not others can be analyzed through historical patterns of queer, female, and gender non-conforming peoples inhabiting bodies that are perceived as feminine, and *thus are sites for patriarchal subordination*.

Denise Riley argues that the body is not “an originating point nor yet a terminus; it is a result or an effect,” (Riley 2003, p. 102). Like Butler, gender has no *telos* for Riley. *Temporality*

is the most important notion that arises from Riley's chapter "Bodies, Identities, Feminisms," a temporality of the sexed and gendered body. She opens the method "of tracing the (always anatomically gendered) body as it is differently established and interpreted as sexed within different periods," (Riley 2003, p. 103). The body only sometimes poses its question in terms of gender, and gendered divisions do not in sum define one's bodily life. Are there some places gender cannot go? Even liberated from the binary, on a spectrum of gender identifications, does gender always occur if it is so constructed? Are there moments of genderless existence, and what are the circumstances? To view the female body as perennially defined, as "constant and even embodiments of sexed being," is to oversimplify the individual's capacity to move in and out of the social *and individual* experience of gender. Clearly gender occurs onto us differently in the presence of others, and it occurs onto us in different ways around different persons. To be made aware of one's gender, to be talked to, looked at, or treated *as* a woman, this register of awareness is always approaching, receding, and slipping in and out of sight from the individual's eye, just as gender moves in and out of the social eye. Being a 'woman' is formed externally within the social or cultural landscapes that one may enter, and pressed onto the bodies of 'women' who are categorized as such. In reference to my discussion of "passing" as a woman, this is the ability to "pass" as an idealized construct of a woman. Passing tends to reward women who embody femininity most closely to the idealized requirements of docility, utility, and beauty, but these embodiments are temporally located in both their *expression* of femininity, and their *recognition as femininity*, both of which fluctuate temporally, and locationally. The internal experience of being a gender is hardly internal, but is instead a marker of how individuals are interpreted *by themselves and by others*, both socially and politically.

While Riley and Butler both emphasize non-essentialist arguments for what “woman” is, neither seems to offer what irreplaceable benefits exist from the identity category of “woman;” Specifically, neither seriously acknowledge that there is an absolute reason to retain a group consciousness of ‘women.’ Many thinkers have argued (such as Linda Alcoff and Susan Bordo) that the category of “woman” *does* have unwavering benefits, and theories that seek to dispose of the category often offer few concrete suggestions for non-essentialist feminist politics outside the academy. For my argument, I acknowledge that ‘woman’ has played an important role in building consciousness to resist oppression, but that group-consciousness based solely on a claim to identity, or a designation to identity, does not give ‘grounding’ to the political movement of feminism. This appeared ‘grounding’ is linguistic, and professes that the sameness of identity characteristics connotes a sameness of politics or strife, a grounding that limits feminism from exploring structures of domination outside of patriarchy, and subjects outside of women.

Part III

Connective Tissues of Emotion, Women, and Feminism

What if feminist politics could be grounded in the connective tissue of emotions that shape the lives of oppressed peoples, instead of grounded in the assumed, homogenous subject of ‘women’? Emotions of pain have historically been vital to describing women’s experiences, as “women’s experiences of violence, injury and discrimination have been crucial to feminist politics,” (Ahmed 2015, p. 172). A painful emotion, such as shame, is not a material consequence of gender, but can be read as an emotion often signifying an individual's relative closeness to physically embodying normative ideals of their “gender.” Tamara Ferguson and

Heidi Lee Dempsey discuss the role that gender plays in an individual's likelihood to feel shame and guilt in social contexts, with findings that suggest one of the conditions of being a 'woman' is feeling shame, a deeply physical and psychological affect (Ferguson & Dempsey, 2000).

Could a base that unites women in a joint revolution *also be a base that is shared* by individuals who are not women? Rephrased, widespread experience and commonality may be shared between groups without losing their revolutionary potency in advocating for alleviation of how social pressure affects *a certain* community of individuals.

Moving from shame to fear in understanding connective tissues of feminism offers another vantage point for feminist politics. Sara Ahmed discusses how "feelings of fear and vulnerability hence shape women's bodies" by authorized narratives of "who should be afraid is bound up with the politics of mobility, whereby the mobility of some bodies involves or even requires the restriction of the mobility of others," (Ahmed 2015, p. 70). Taking Stoljar's second point from her cluster concept of woman, varying qualifications and characteristics of 'women' gather in a cluster, touching the bodies of women, and touching the bodies of feminized, subordinated, and/or sexualized bodies. Social factors like fear are also seen as a connective tissue of women's experience, in that fear of being in the public world means one is susceptible to "shrinkage," away from spaces marked as 'unsafe' for women, like being out at night, walking alone, and being in places like bars and nightclubs where drugging and sexual violence have become normalized to such an extent that the onus is put on women to prevent their own experience of violence by simply removing themselves, or avoiding 'reckless' behavior (like wearing something revealing, or drinking). If fear sticks to some bodies because of social narratives of who should be scared, we can apply this emotional process to our study of the

proxemics of public space; to analyze how public space organized and maintained as a place where certain people should be scared for their life or well-being. Fear sticks to bodies that suffer systemic violence; black men are murdered by police in public space, trans people are attacked or murdered in public space, houseless people are so dehumanized that violence onto them in a public space is seen as consequential of their existence. A feminist politics could address and bring attention to how fear circulates, and who it sticks to. Some bodies are marked as *objects* of fear, where existing in public space is dangerous because they are perceived as a threat.

Moving from fear to vulnerability, some bodies and representations are seen and treated as more vulnerable to violence than others. Sara Ahmed says that “vulnerability is not an inherent characteristic of women’s bodies; rather, it is an effect that works to secure femininity as a delimitation of movement in the public, and over-inhabitation in the private,” (Ahmed 2015, p. 70). The emotion of feeling vulnerable has to do with a certain expectation of violence. Seeing others as vulnerable does the work of underestimating their capacity to defend themselves, and also as seeing them as obvious receptacles for violence. In attaching to subjects such as women and children, the emotion of vulnerability does the work of justifying necessary external protection, which allows external forces (the State, men, parents) to deny rights based on assuming control of the vulnerable subject’s protection. A feminist politics that analyzes how some bodies get marked as vulnerable, despite the realistic probability that violence won’t occur, and how some bodies get marked as objects of fear, despite the realist probability that violence is likely to occur *onto them*, this politics could better attend to the emotions that hold so many of our political ideals, prejudices, and stereotypes in place, despite evidence to the contrary.

Experiences of shame, hyper-sexualization, sexual subordination, abuse, and silencing could be seen as the affects of women, (not women alone, but of women nonetheless.) The argument that these emotions and affects circulate and stick to some bodies, and not others, would provide a comprehensive reading of how identities are constructed and played into on a deeply emotional level. Conceiving of the subjectivity of women could involve a deep analysis of the "complex of habits resulting from the semiotic interaction of 'outer world' and 'inner world,' the continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality," (de Lauretis 1995, p. 182). This interaction between the subject and social reality is *semiotic*, as de Lauretis points out, involving charged signs and symbols of identification which both produce the subject, and produce social reality. To investigate the cluster concept of 'women' would also involve interrogating how *signs, objects, and symbols come to be gendered*, and come to *signify* gender.

The web of woman is not made up of obstacles and hindrances alone. The joy of solidarity of people who have suffered *not as you have suffered*, but who have suffered nonetheless; not someones who feels your pain, but bears witness and comradery to your pain. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed discusses the impossibility of an empathy that would profess 'I feel your pain!' The very impossibility of this empathy, how some pains are impossible to grasp but it is because of this impossibility that we must subject ourselves to "a different kind of inhabitance," (Ahmed 2015, p. 39). Ahmed professes an "ethics of responding to pain," of "being open to being affected by that which one cannot know or feel," (Ahmed 2015, p. 32). To recognize and discover that which "refuses to keep us apart, but also does not bring us together," (Ahmed 2015, p. 39). A collective politics must find an ethics of responding to pain, or this professed solidarity will be empty. There is also the joy, that comes from a chorus of

desires for a different world, the community and comradery that comes from all the darkness of oppression. For women who give birth to their first child, for men who give birth to their first child, the joys of carrying a child, the joys of raising a child, the joys of never, ever having a child, all the joys of womanhood, of personhood. The joys of what has been considered ‘woman’ seep out from the depalidated borders of the category of women, to touch all who wish it, and to require no membership within its boundaries, because these boundaries are in flux, moving, shifting, over different bodies in different contexts.

Opening the Category of Women

Post-structuralist thought has been utilized by many feminist theorists to advocate that “feminist efforts must be directed toward dismantling this fiction (of ‘woman’),” (Alcoff 1988, p. 417). While identifying with patriarchal conceptions of ‘women’ is theorized by Brown and Riley to resubordinate women, the history of the present must be considered in order to understand the parameters of a launch point of women’s future in the world. Ridding the category of ‘women’ of its patriarchal configurations would have to fundamentally challenge the naturalized understandings of who women are, as they have almost always been defined in relation to men. If the conception of ‘women’ is so often resignified, it seems both important and perilous to invoke Julia Kristeva’s analysis of the modern European feminism invocation of ‘women’, which “is itself a temporary form which must wither away,” (Riley 2003, p. 109). What is specifically important about Kristeva’s analysis is the *temporality* of any claim to woman, where resignification of gender identity must constantly be propelling towards the future imagined, the future desired, rather than configured in relation and limited to oppressive structures of the past and the present. To allow ‘women’ to be free from essentialist definitions is

“to open up a term, like the subject, to a reusage or redeployment that previously has not been authorized,” (Butler 1992, p. 15).

Natalie Stoljar invokes nominalism to construct a cluster concept of ‘women’: “‘Woman’ could be the name of a class of similar particulars without implying that womanness constitutes a natural universal,” (Stoljar 1995, p. 276). If we accept that ‘women’ are socially constructed, “then the ‘essence* of woman... is a nominal one. It is a totality of qualities, properties and attributes that such feminists define, envisage, or enact for themselves,” (de Lauretis 2003, p. 3). Stoljar smartly nominates woman as a “cluster-concept,” organizing individuals based on real similarities among the real and social type of ‘woman.’ She outlines for general elements of the cluster-concept of ‘women’:

The first element she discusses is womanness as “attributed on the basis of female sex,” such as chromosomal makeup or “bodily characteristics such as gait or voice quality.” Secondly, the phenomenological features of being a woman which includes both experiences produced both by social factors, “like fear of walking on the streets at night or fear of rape,” and physical factors, like menstrual pain or feminine sexuality. Her third element describes the culturally produced and embodied roles that women experience, ranging from the responsibilities women are saddled with (like child-rearing or making oneself small), to women’s oppression under normative expressions of femininity (how women are propositioned to dress, act, and move.) Her fourth element is both self-identification and how we are perceived by others; “calling oneself a woman and being called a woman,” (Stoljar 1995, p. 283-284).

What “counts” as being a woman is controversial, but if we understand these elements as not wholly constitutive of every woman, but rather as markers of similarity *among* women, the

exclusionary nature of a homogenized form that women can take is avoided. Her first element includes female sex which might automatically be read as trans-exclusionary, but she explains that “female sex is centrally important to the notion of woman and how individuals can be women without being of the female sex,” (Stoljar 1995, p. 285). Within her projection of ‘women’ as a resemblance class, “people are women when they have enough of the properties relevant in the application of the concept,” (Stoljar 1995, p. 288). While this idea is freshly tangible in its discussion of what a pragmatic feminist politics could look like for women, would being an individual who satisfies all four elements make them *more of a woman* than someone who identifies with only one or two elements? Emphasizing that there is a degree to which one is a woman is not a problematic concept in itself, because there are various degrees to which we all embody our personal identities (for example, someone who is white-passing but identifies as a person of color due to their lineage and experiences.) It should follow that satisfying all four elements within the cluster-group of ‘women’ does not necessarily mean the maximization of patriarchal oppression, because there are privileges attached to embodying perfectly the conception of the idealized ‘woman’ (being cisgender, with reproductive capacities, and visually discernible as a woman). It should also follow that any qualifying elements within the cluster of women’s identification are always shifting and open to re-signification, to adding elements, subtracting them, a politics of contestation.

Though there is no single, unifying, socio-physical experience of gender, or of race, or of class, there is a web of material and nonmaterial conditions, woven through a plurality of hands and experiences. By ‘material conditions’ I do not mean internal or essential conditions that make someone a woman, but rather the materiality that configures and imposes itself upon this

subject disposition. A web of woman can be imagined as the material, emotional, and social obstacles and hindrances being the strings of “woman” that immobilize individuals, all captured within their infinite specificity of locatedness. The materiality of tucking underwear for some trans women, the materiality of chest binders for some trans men who have possibly had past experience as a woman, the materiality of menstruation, of menopause, of never getting a period, but the physical pain of wanting one so that you can be like other girls, the emotional discourse that imbeds all women deeply in both shame and pleasure of the material and emotional life of gender.

The normative foundations of identity categories are constantly being resignified in accordance to always-shifting relevant sociocultural norms, and thus attention to the specificity of factionalizations has been, and could be, a truly emancipatory task of feminist discourse and theorizing. Contestations of circulating definitions of ‘women’ don’t have to be conflict-oriented factionalizations, but could be a way to deconstruct terms of identity and unweave them from an assumed experience, to “continue to use (these terms), to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power,” (Brown 1992, p. 17). To continue to use these terms in new, generative ways, to include emotions as markers for how people are subjected, to use how people interact with space and location, to define ‘who’ women are by ‘what we want,’ which is always shaped by what we have, and the conditions in the present (Brown 1995, p. 75).

A politics of feminism does not need to abandon the subject of women, but a politics of feminism cannot be grounded in women, and the women that feminist politics speak for cannot be taken for granted as essential, inherent, or fixed. If gender categories are theorized to be

essential or beyond negation, these concepts it will be challenged. The concept of ‘woman’ will continue to evolve, reorganize, and deconstruct itself, as will all human-defined categorizations. Constantly resignifying “women” as a normative identity will also lead to a continuous evaluation of how women interact with the world, and the world interacts with women, or one’s womanness. I too believe that “the rifts among women over the content of the term ought to be safeguarded and prized, indeed, that this constant rifting ought to be affirmed as the ungrounded ground of feminist theory,” (Butler 1992, 16). However, this “constant rifting” of the term ‘woman’ should not be the *only* ground from which feminist theory bases its politics, though it should be *a* ground. Moving to decentralize the subject of ‘women’ as feminism’s primary subject is a step towards expanding it’s analysis to subjects not located within the gender binary, and also a step towards a feminist politics that is capable of recognizing the intersections of privilege and powerlessness within identities.

Decentralizing the Subject of ‘Women’ as the Primary Subject of Feminism

A feminist politics that demonizes men as the enemy and patriarchy as the sole source of women’s oppression relies on a “reductive dichotomy between men and women” that refuses intersectionality in it’s insistence on investing in a political consciousness which “has been built around simple dichotomies such as powerful/powerless; oppressor/victim,” (Cohen 1997, p. 452, 480). For example, “Kill All Men,” is a presumably feminist slogan, which spread from the art world to the internet, one denoting the fantasy of a violent overthrow of patriarchy. The slogan emphasises gender as the target and source of oppression, but fails to acknowledge that the speaker of a slogan must rely on a dichotomy of power which precludes any intersectional understanding of identities. Popular twitter account “@gringatears” who runs the podcast “Bitter

Brown Femmes” stated in one tweet: “I’m not okay with White feminists and their ‘kill all men’ flower Tumblr gifs aesthetic. Your whiteness has/does kill men. Non-White men.” This tweet emblemized how white women feel incapable of being an oppressor simply because of their oppressed status within patriarchy. “White feminism” has become colloquially acknowledged to express when a theory or person fails to address the intersections of racial identity and experience. A feminism that demonizes all men “discounts the relationships- especially those based on shared experiences of marginalization-” that exist between men and women, “particularly in communities of color,” (Cohen 1997, p. 450).

Feminism should not be delimited to women as its subject, because women’s liberation is intrinsically tied to issues that encompass more than just women. Liberation from systemic or supremacist racism will incur the liberation of women, and others who are immobilized by racial discrimination. Liberation from the straight state, the heteronormativity that constricts sexual identities, another occurrence of women’s liberation. Class oppression and the emotional, material, immobilizing harms of capitalism, this is about women. Deconstructing and fighting what the gender binary tells us to be, who patriarchy tells us women *are*, this is a fight for anyone cognizant enough to recognize that *these systems of power all benefit from and reproduce each other*. As subjects shift, politics shift as well, and our theorizing needs to keep up. Resistance to patriarchal oppression will be best enacted when actual connective tissues of subordinated femininity are elucidated, and when these tissues can be understood as always in movement, touching bodies perceived as women, touching bodies that are seen as less than human, touching bodies that are subordinated in historical power dynamics. It is when “feminism is no longer directed towards a critique of patriarchy, or secured by the categories of ‘women’ or

‘gender’, that is it is doing the most ‘moving’ work,” (Ahmed 2015, p. 176). By ‘moving’, Ahmed is talking about the loss of an object, the loss restriction to only one subject, that could enable feminism’s energy to “open up possibilities of action that are not constrained by what we are against in the present,” (Ahmed 2015, p. 176). Losing the subject of women as a ‘ground’ for feminism “opens up possibilities of action that are not constrained by” how we are *defined* in the present. With the loss of a fixed and assumed subject of ‘women,’ possibilities of feminist politics bubble over into resisting the subordination of the Earth, advocating for creatures organized in a hierarchy of value *as less valuable* than humans, and supporting marginalized sexualities deemed irregular and inconsistent within a heteronormative gender binary. Feminism should resist and speak out against the subordination of oppressed subjects by contesting the very terms of such oppression. Feminism should be contesting that there are physical and emotional traits that make someone’s life less valuable than someone else’s.

If there is no universal solution, or no universal problem, there is no universal subject, no universal theory. Feminism should proceed with acknowledging the reality of a political system built on categorizations, but feminism should *profess* a world-system of contingent, deconstructed realities of fluidity and criticism. Feminism can avoid determining a universal conception of who ‘women’ are by relinquishing the ability to define women by one thing, one experience, or one interpretation. There should always be a voice saying “No, that’s not it,” thus, I agree in part with Julia Kristeva, because the process by which we define ‘woman’ must be constantly negated, and "a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say 'that's not it' and 'that's still not it,'" (Kristeva 1981, p. 137). An embodied and stable notion of who and what women *are* is not necessary in order to have a

feminist praxis that invokes more than a discourse of constant negation (“that’s not it”). To deconstruct the subject is to free oneself from the connotations and prejudices one’s subjecthood carries, and to de-essentialize but keep in understanding the historical transfigurations that mark all of our bodies.

Poststructural thinkers like Julia Kristeva promote a feminist politics that refuses to articulate the subject of ‘woman’ as a category worth claiming for feminist politics. "A woman cannot be; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists...." (Kristeva 1981, p. 137). Within much of post-structural feminism, women cannot be liberated from patriarchal domination unless they subvert all association and identification *as* women. The difficulty in finding the language to describe and discuss poststructural feminism is actually indicative of a *strength* of poststructural-feminism. Is our inability to write about women beyond their historical construction a promising subversion of women’s subordination? Or would we be losing the words from our mouths about discrimination we know to be true to our feminine bodies or feminized subjectivities? Our discourse is limited from imagining possibilities for ourselves outside of the constructions of our own subjectivity. Our words, our stories of the world, and the propagations of stereotypes, these all inform our ability to understand ourselves, and each other. If “woman” could be so thoroughly disrupted by infinite and distinct embodiments and expressions, then would gender discrimination be revealed as only a coincidental, would gender discrimination continue to be talked about at all? How would we talk about it?

Feminist Consciousness: A Turn to Movements Over Identity

The contestation of the category of ‘women’ is an absolutely necessary discussion for feminist politics. In discussing what *could* serve to ground feminist politics, we should turn not towards grounding our politics in a definitive subject, but rather in a stratified resistance to all forms of subordination. If any and all universal traits of women are problematically racialized, classist, and heteronormative, is there a salvageable category of ‘women’ to carry with us into future theorizing if we are also fighting for stripping feminism of its white supremacy, heteronormativity, and feminism’s negligence of how women’s experiences vary across socioeconomic position and cultural location? It seems that “in many contexts, ‘women’ are too heterogeneous to be treated as a unitary group,” (Hunter 1996, p. 156). The task of mitigating our discourse to avoid totalizing any theory is a positive trajectory for intersectional feminism. Perhaps there should be no ‘feminism,’ only *feminisms*, a network of alliances to alleviate subordination that occurs through various apparatuses on our gendered and sexed beings.

I argue that investing in a feminist consciousness is different than investing in a consciousness of women, and retaining an investment in consciousness based around shared ideals and grievances is a better investment for feminist politics than a women’s consciousness, which only goes as far to assert commonality around identity. A feminist consciousness would offer a practice of understanding the tethered fates of all oppressed peoples, and the tethered pain of oppressed peoples, which through speaking of our pain and listening to others pain can be a “condition for the formation of a ‘we’, made up of different stories of pain that cannot be reduced to a ground, identity, or a sameness,” (Ahmed 2015, p. 174).

What would a politics not invested in a fixed subject look like? In “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” Cathy J. Cohen asks us to consider “a politics where one’s relation to

power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades," (Cohen 1997, p. 438). The potential for transformative coalition work is inhibited by "political practices structured around binary conceptions of sexuality and power," or binary conceptions of gender and power, as we've seen in my example of white feminism, where all women are imagined to be oppressed, and all men are imagined to be oppressive, discounting and disregarding the varying levels of privilege that are experienced by members of both groups due to racial identity, class-status, and sexual orientation (Cohen 1997, p. 441). Cohen elucidates that a problem with queer politics is that the reproduction of a dichotomy of power (heterosexuals/all queers) reduces and "collapses our understanding of power into a single continuum of evaluation," (Cohen 1997, p. 452). The dichotomous approaches to power that "consistently activate only one characteristic of their identity... to organize their politics" actually reject "any recognition of the multiple and intersecting systems of power that largely dictate our life chances," (Cohen 1997, p. 440). Cohen argues that black and latinx women welfare recipients face systemic oppression due to the always racialized, gendered, and capitalistic institution of heteronormativity. Cohen makes this argument not to argue that the experiences of varying queer peoples should be conflated or assumed synonymous to other groups that suffer due to heterosexual domination, but rather to profess a queer politics that is "inclusive of all those who stand outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality," (Cohen 1997, p. 441). By acknowledging the contingent oppressions of welfare recipients and queer people, political coalitions can be formed by grappling with heteronormativity's expansive power, a power that is inextricably embedded and reproduced in white supremacy, patriarchy, and class-based oppression. Though the same

oppressive power structure may be elucidated as a common enemy, it is important to emphasize that these oppressions are experienced in different ways, and have different effects, on differing subjects. It is not a professed ‘sameness’ of experience that grounds coalitional politics, but rather a deep understanding of how the intersectionality of identity can link movements of marginalized peoples. I argue for a feminist solidarity like Cohens, that moves across and among identities, grounded in “our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges,” (Cohen 1997, p. 458). This connective tissue requires an intersectional analysis of how power functions on different bodies and in different regions, creating a politics that acknowledges the tethered fates of people across and within identities. This also requires acknowledging the privileges marginalized people hold *within* marginalized communities; for example, a queer person with white privilege experiences the violence of heteronormativity differently than a queer latinx person, and attention to these differences requires not only a comprehensive analysis of the different ways heteronormativity functions, but also grappling with how white normativity organizes and oppresses different bodies in conjunction with, and isolation from, the heteronormative power that marks both bodies.

The connectivity between persons on the basis of what is deprived does not necessarily need a subject, but it requires people who share this need, and people who profess solidarity and support *despite their differences in identity or experience*. Feminism must lose the category of women as it’s only subject, as a subject defined in a fixed manner, and the characteristics of women must be constantly defined, and redefined, for as long as subjectivity is constantly being redefined by the peoples under it’s guise, we, as feminists, can perpetuate and assert a culture of offering our best possible truths, and never rendering them complete or entirely holistic.

Feminist politics doesn't require a negative politics despite my arguments that the category of 'women' should always be contested ; reactivity alone does not need to guide or restrict the possibilities for how oppressed peoples resist or articulate better futures. In some ways, all of humanity that lives today is confined in some way confined or burdened by ideologies which rely upon the subordination of characteristics that we would *all* serve to reconsider; animalism, weakness, vulnerability, lack of desire to master the earth, etc. A world where 'woman' no longer *means* being subordinated can be imagined by not just naive iterations that don't reflect reality, but think beyond the names we have been born into. If we proctor understanding the role of our own identities in our own experience, this knowledge cannot avoid inseminating the ideals we hold about others. The revolution will be self-reflective. We may very well begin to understand the practice of being, and articulate for ourselves a future that is not constricted to how we are perceived and located within categories of identification. People who identify as 'women' can resist subordination by critically engaging the alliances and commonalities shared by those subordinated. To comprehend a theory of universalize domination, to varying degrees and extents and experiences. Feminism would be suited to comprehend a theory of universalize domination, to varying degrees and extents and experiences, in order to examine the connective fibers that makes feminism necessary for the world.

One example of a generative, unexplored "connective tissue" in feminist politics (neither theory nor praxis) is between Donald Trump's rhetoric of "Energy Dominance," used in both legislation and as an expressed position of the U.S. "Energy Dominant" is the stance of the U.S. in terms of ceasing to drill or frack oil; the U.S. is not cutting back, repurposing, or reconceptualizing energy, Trump says; the U.S. is *energy dominant*. Trump is deploying a

masculinist conception of subordination onto a submissive “other.” This “submissiveness” is gained through subordination, force, or an unwillingness to negotiate. People who engage in the embodied resistance of Trump’s violent immigration policies and rhetoric are also positioned against his legislation of masculinist conceptions of a forcefully subordinated “other.” Could resistance to these violences ever solely be attributed to powers of patriarchy, or of white supremacy, or of heterosexism, of class-based oppression? Is this resistance solely the task of women, of people of color, of queer people, or of the lower socioeconomic class? I argue this resistance between two stratas of embodied identity is a *connective tissue*. Feminist *theory* taking up more coalitional politics is a feminism attentive to connective tissues. The analysis of patterns in how different identities and different bodies are marked with and by emotions is a fruitful connective tissue, one to be explored across geographic and social locations. To explore the connective tissue of emotions within culturally assigned identities could produce articulations of tethered struggles, movements, and passions. Feminist *practice* gaining momentum in taking up connective tissues means the being moved and motivated by stories where *you are not the subject*.

Conclusion

Feminist politics is having an identity crisis, and so am I. Gender fluidity is not the first cultural phenomenon to bring up a cacophony of criticisms about mainstream feminism’s limited scope, subject, and content. By examining how canonical feminist thinkers have attempted to ground feminist politics in a defined category of women, I have sought to show how feminism has problematically promoted gender essentialism in a way that constricts the politics of

feminism by recreating the discourse of women as naturally or essentially subordinated by male domination. Limiting feminism's project to only be attentive to the connective tissue *between women* doesn't go far enough to unpack how this tissue connects people outside of the category of 'women.' When feminism fails to have an intersectional analysis of power and subjectivity, it also fails to have any relevant truths to offer the question of how power functions outside of the dichotomy of power where 'men' are the oppressors, and 'women' are the oppressed. This kind of analysis could only occur in a vacuum.

Gender fluidity is not a problem for feminism, but rather an opportunity for feminism, to establish connective tissues of experience, emotion, and political ideals in order to mobilize solidarity, instead of relying on a fixed category of identification to denote its politics. Decentralizing the subject of 'women' is important for feminism not just in wake of gender fluidities rising popularity, but also in recognizing that a politics that is only attentive to the gendered being of 'woman' cannot account for the complex interrelations of patriarchy, white supremacy, class-based oppression, and other institutional powers of domination. Awareness of our tethered oppressions is the first step of building a collective consciousness that can no longer see any system of domination as intrinsically separate from any other system of domination.

Feminist politics should adopt a deconstructive approach when engaging with identity categories. A deconstructive approach prompts feminism to make structural accounts of how various subjects are produced by power dynamics that seek to essentialize stereotyped conceptions of oppressed peoples. A deconstructive approach does not require a rejection and demonization of all characteristics culturally associated with women, but it does reject that any of these characteristics are innate or essential. Just as there is no one universal attribute of

women, there is no one source of women's oppression. A deconstructive approach requires the understanding that we are all constructed and imbricated differently within power relations, but that these differences do not necessarily correlate to also having different or incompatible political desires. In fact, these differences are a strength of coalitional politics, enabling a richer understanding of how emotions circulate and come to mark some bodies and not others, of how prejudices that rely on similar justifications come to restrict some bodies, and not others.

The subject of 'women' is a category we have inherited, but it will only be a condemnation of our futures *if we let it define us in all that we are*. I'm not offering a politics of identity, but a politics of emotion, like Sara Ahmed, and a politics of deconstruction, like Judith Butler, a politics of temporality, like Denise Riley, a politics that moves, is felt, that touches us. A chorus of joy, pain, restriction, freedom, and attention to the tethered fates of oppressed peoples everywhere. Restricting the primary subject of feminism to 'women' limits feminist politics from the potential power it could have on the lives of subordinated peoples everywhere. If something is a 'feminist issue,' it should not be aligned with feminist politics simply because a woman is touched by it; it should be aligned with feminist politics if it is not a world that feminism wants to invest in, to recreate, or to endorse. If connective tissues can be established, integration of individuals into groups should congeal into overlapping and indiscriminate groupings that revolve around changing desires, interests, and urgencies, developing constant iterations of better worlds, better arguments, better theories.

My theory of 'connective tissues' of emotion as a ground for feminist politics promotes a politics of analyzing patterns that arise in comparing how different bodies and identities are subordinated, and attending to the complexities of power structures. A feminist consciousness

that is attentive to the emotional currents sustaining patriarchal domination is likely to find that these emotional currents travel through a variety of systems of domination. In my example of Abu Ghraib, I discussed how the sexualization of inequality and of power dynamics is not limited to female bodies or women subjects, but permeates across the bodies of prisoners, queer people, and non-white persons who live in white-dominated societies. It is important for feminist politics to be attentive to how sexual subordination is weaponized and deployed in pre-existing power dynamics, like racial hierarchies, in order to truly resist the concept that sexual subordination is a natural affect of the human condition. To contest the terms of such power dynamics is also a vital project for feminism, to resist the universal but varied oppression of subordinated persons. Attending to how various subject groups experience oppression (such as sexual subordination) that feminism has historically designated as ‘women’s issues’ allows these issues to be not descriptive or indicative of one’s position as a woman, but rather indicative of one’s relationship to the dominant power structures of the world. Opening the subject of feminism is the process of building a coalitional feminist politics, a politics that is capable of attending to a multiplicity of subjects that share investments in the destruction of oppressive power structures. Patriarchy is not a system that only touches the bodies of women- it is also a structure that is deeply invested in heteronormativity for the purposes of controlling the reproduction of subjects and the organization of families. Political rhetoric around ‘reproduction’ being the primary role of female bodied people is also deployed in anti-gay rhetoric that requires ‘reproduction’ be a signifier of legitimate sexual relationships. The United States government has sought to control the reproductive capabilities and practices of Black women in the U.S, forcefully promoting eugenics in order to maintain white dominance and white purity in the

national population. 'Reproduction' is a connective tissue woven through a plurality of identities of oppressed peoples who are affected by norms around reproduction that aim to promote 'acceptable' forms of child-rearing based on who is considered to be an 'unacceptable' parent. This is a way that feminist politics can take up the politics of reproduction as a connective tissue that imbricates a multiplicity of people, while refraining to isolate, homogenize, and hierarchize the perspective of 'women as a whole' as the subject of the discussion.

'Reproduction' is just one example of how feminist politics can maintain attention to the material conditions that pervade the lives of many women, without promoting the the notion systems invested in controlling women's reproduction affect only women, and that the women it does affect are all effected in a homogenous way. Feminist politics have relied on being able to locate some issues as specific to 'women,' and also to locate those 'women' as sharing a set of identifiable traits. In an age where gender is becoming more fluid, feminist politics need to adapt with it. Feminism must relinquish the over-simplified notion of a dichotomous system of power, a system that is also invested in maintaining the gender binary as a means of organizing and controlling gendered subjects. Feminism must also relinquish the subject of women as its exclusive subject of exploration, and turn instead to a politics of inter-related subjects and connected experiences of oppression. Opening the category of women to resignification, decentralizing 'women' from being the primary and assumed subject of feminism, and turning to movements of collective politics, connected tissue, and analyses of emotion will ultimately reorient contemporary feminist politics to a more inclusive, intersectional, and relevant form of politics. Defining 'women' has been a political project of feminism since feminism's origination as a movement, and the tradition should continue with a deconstructive aim. The connective

tissue of feminist politics no longer has to be the subject of women; rather, it can be an amalgamation of contingent oppressions, the affective politics of emotion, the building of solidarity across stratas of identity. To mobilize feminist politics we must permit feminism to *move*, to draw patterns of social experience in an unlimited manner, resulting in a clearer focus of how complex and far-reaching oppressive structures of power truly are.

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