

Women's Standpoint, the Gendering of Moral Voices/Moral Selves, and the View from Foucault¹

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Abstract

In this essay, the author provides a brief exposition of the work that Nancy Hartsock, Dorothy Smith, and Carol Gilligan have carried out in their respective fields with a view to establishing the relevance and legitimacy of women's experiences or *standpoint* or, alternatively, of women's *voice*, for the organization of academic and moral discourse. He then proceeds to critically assess the strategic value and possibility of attributing, as the aforementioned authors have done, fixed, cross-cultural characteristics to masculine and feminine identities. To accomplish this he invokes the work of Michel Foucault for whom the question of *woman*, like all questions of meaning, must be one of negotiating a path between always particularized, localized, specified, and, therefore, *impure* subject positions, each one reflecting not only gender identities, but also heterogeneous and heteronomous intersections of gender, race, class, language, culture, that neither presuppose nor fix their constitutive subjects in place.

Keywords: feminism, women's standpoint, women's experience

Introduction

In face of what they see as the dominantly masculinist culture's habitual devaluation of whatever is seen as *female*, many proponents of *women's experience* in the Philippines and elsewhere have, in recent years, sought not only to highlight and celebrate the commonalities that women share, but also to present their unique capacities—their different voice, *different muse*, *different psychology*, *different experience* of love, work, family, hope—as viable objects of knowledge in generally masculinist domains where women's contributions had previously been left out. Delia Aguilar (in Visvanathan, Duggan, & Nisonoff, 1997), for one, notes that “it is in the realm of culture in which [Filipina] women have been most energetic and most passionate” (p. 311). Indeed, to a degree “both remarkable and inspiring,” “[Filipina] women's talent, imagination, creativity,

and resources” have been showcased in and through “the publication of books and journals, [the] staging of plays, music composition, the visual arts, performances on radio and TV” (Aguilar in Visvanathan, Duggan, & Nisonoff, 1997, p. 311). These, in Aguilar’s view, have provided the mass and momentum for “the work of reform—in laws, courts, education, etc.—and a more concentrated focus on social and psychological factors such as ways of being and habits of mind that privilege men, and [pay] less and less attention to discrepancies in the material conditions of daily life” (Aguilar in Visvanathan, Duggan, & Nisonoff, 1997, p. 311-312). These critical interrogations of the “ways of being and habits of mind that privilege men . . . [and elide] the material conditions of daily life” (Aguilar in Visvanathan, Duggan, & Nisonoff, 1997, p. 313) have resonances, of course, in the work that elsewhere, feminist writers and theorists such as Nancy Hartsock, Dorothy Smith, and Carol Gilligan, have carried out—Hartsock and Smith, with a view to establishing the relevance and legitimacy of women’s experiences or *standpoint* for the organization of sociological (and, broadly speaking, academic) discourse; Gilligan, with a view to developing systems of ethics that eschew the notions of rights or formal reasoning (which, they argue, privilege a male point of view), and that assign pride of place instead to sets of values based on women’s experience as women, specifically, as mothers and care-givers within the private realm of the family.²

Women’s standpoint

The publication of Nancy Hartsock’s highly influential book, *Money, Sex, and Power: Towards a Feminist Historical Materialism*, marked the emergence of a major feminist-Marxist endeavor to understand the function of the gendered standpoint in mainstream theories of power. A key element of Hartsock’s argument is that approaches to defining and understanding power vary according to gender: whereas men think of power virtually always in terms of *power over some object*—in terms, that is, of the establishment of one’s dominance or ascendancy over someone or something as a means of securing one’s advantage, women define and understand power in terms of the *power to do something*, in terms, that is, of the exercise of a positive, enabling force. As Hartsock (1985) sees it, the trouble with the male understanding and exercise of power is that it is built upon the patently false assumption that the human world is comprised of a market-driven network of hegemonic, adversarial relations, in face of which aspects of power pertaining to inequities of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, “energy, capacity and potential,” simply “disappear from view” (p. 41). The human world that results from the operation

of such an understanding could only be “fragile, instrumental and ultimately false, composed of persons with no intrinsic connection with each other” (Hartsock, 1985, p. 50). Hartsock’s solution? Develop the means to distinguish reality from false appearances, by *grounding our epistemology*, not in commodity exchange (that is, the abstraction of use value in the service of exchange), but *in production* (that is, the actual, sensuous activity and experience of laborers and workers), specifically, in “the variety [of women’s] connectednesses and continuities both with other persons and with the natural world” (Hartsock, 1985, p. 242). This would require the institution of “a separate and distinct women’s tradition of theorizing power,” (Hartsock, 1985, p. 151) a *women’s standpoint* from which the partiality and perversity of those “negative, masculine forms of *eros*” which underwrite “the reality of rape, sexual murder, and pornography,” could finally be laid bare (Hartsock, 1985, p. 210).

Hartsock also writes:

Women’s lives, like men’s, are structured by social relations which manifest the experience of the dominant gender and class. The ability to go beneath the surface of appearances to reveal the real but concealed social relations requires both theoretical and political activity. Feminist theorists must demand that feminist theorizing be grounded in women’s material activity, and must as well be part of the political struggle necessary to develop areas of social life modeled on this activity.³ (Hartsock in Harding & Hintikka, 1983, p. 304)

Dorothy Smith, for her part, points to the complicity of social scientific inquiry with a “mode of ruling” that is “masculinist” in that it reflects men’s own experience of managing, organizing, administering, and otherwise controlling power. Indeed, for Smith, the abstractness of sociological discourse can be traced back to its complicity with a masculinist mode of ruling whose most defining characteristic is that it is “extra-local.” Concerning this point she writes:

Its characteristic modes of consciousness are objectified and impersonal; its relations are governed by organizational logics and exigencies. We are not ruled by powers that are essentially implicated in particularized ties of kinship, family, and household and anchored in relationships to particular patches of ground. We are ruled by forms of organization vested

in and mediated by texts and documents, and constituted externally. . . . The practice of ruling involves the ongoing representation of the local actualities of our worlds in the standardized and general forms of knowledge that enter them into the relations of ruling. (Smith, 1987, p. 3)

The most obvious effect of this “mode of ruling,” notes Smith (1987), is the development, within sociological discourse, of a “line of fault” between “the world as it is known directly in experience” and “the ideas and images fabricated externally to that everyday world and provided as a means to think and image it” (p. 55). This, in her view, explains why women seldom, if ever, find their lives, their work, their experiences, mirrored in the images and ideas deployed by sociology to describe them, let alone in sociology’s dominant conceptual schemes. But if women’s experiences are excluded from the production of such images and ideas, it is because the corporeality of their activity, both in caring for the bodies of men, babies, children, old people, the sick, their own bodies, and in maintaining all of those local spaces (e.g. the home and workplace) where such bodies exist, is utterly alien to the abstractness of social scientific inquiry. Yet, were it not for such activities, and for the women who underwrite them, male theorists would be hard put to accomplish the work on the wings of which they soar to their accustomed heights of abstraction. Smith writes:

To a very large extent the direct work of liberating men into abstraction . . . has been and is the work of women. The place of women, then, in relation to this mode of action is where the work is done to facilitate men’s occupation of the conceptual mode of action. Women keep house, bear and care for children, look after men when they are sick, and in general provide for the logistics of bodily existence. But this marriage aspect of women’s work is only one side of a more general relation. Women work in and around the professional and managerial scene in analogous ways. They do those things that give concrete form to the conceptual activities. They do the clerical work, giving material form to the words or thoughts of the boss. They do the routine work, the interviewing for the survey, the nursing, the secretarial work. (Smith, 1987, p. 83)

But, alas, the more successfully women perform their work, the more invisible this work becomes to those who rule. Indeed, “from the standpoint of ruling, the actual practices, the labor and the organization of labor which

makes the existence of a ruling class and their ruling possible, are invisible” (Smith, 1987, p. 80). Smith, therefore, finds it necessary to counterpoise to the standpoint of ruling, a *women’s standpoint*. Because such a standpoint would be located “outside the ruling class and in that class whose part in the overall division of labor is to produce the conditions of its own ruling and the existence of a ruling class,” (Smith, 1987, p. 80) activities underwritten by women, but which, for that very reason, men have such trouble seeing as part of a distinctively human culture and history, are able, finally, to emerge into view.⁴ While other standpoints besides that of women (e.g. the standpoint of women *and* men of color, of native peoples, of gay men and lesbians) have similarly been denied a stake in the ruling discourses, and while the inclusion of these other standpoints in the public discourse would similarly enliven and enrich discussion, “the standpoint of women,” Smith (1987) argues, “is distinctive and has distinctive implications for the practice of sociology” (p. 107). For one thing, it would focus inquiry upon worlds that can be observed, spoken about, visited and revisited, verified (p. 123), thereby committing the researcher “to an exploration, description, and analysis of . . . a complex of relations, conceived in the abstract but from the entry point of some particular person or persons whose everyday world of working is organized thereby” (Smith, 1987, p. 160).⁵

The gendering of moral voices/moral selves

Turning now to Carol Gilligan, the publication in 1982 of her book, *In A Different Voice*, with its allegations of sex differences in ethical reasoning, marked a major effort to counterpoise a feminist *ethics of care* to a masculinist *ethics of justice* (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan’s work can be read as a critical interrogation of the research of Lawrence Kohlberg, her mentor at Harvard University, whom she chides for his persistent reliance on research perspectives derived exclusively from the study of male subjects. Not surprisingly, since any account of moral development is necessarily structured by the experience—individual and collective—of the subject or the self that informs it, Kohlberg’s account of his subjects’ moral development is a description of their improved adeptness (marked by developmental stages) at abstract forms of moral reasoning. Indeed, the more fully developed the individual subject is, the more likely he is to reason by reference to abstract and universal principles, as opposed to the consequences of his actions on specific persons and communities.⁶ Kohlberg’s account, in other words, remains patterned after those relations which men appear to be most familiar and comfortable with—arms’ length relations with colleagues and strangers that are governed by rules and

conventions which abstract selves from the particularities of circumstance, and which are driven by the imperative to formulate universal principles.⁷ Moral reasoning, accordingly, qualifies as mature only if it is capable of deciding moral dilemmas by appealing to a hierarchy of rights in which some rights trump others. But, contends Gilligan (1982), by “implicitly adopting male life as the norm,” Kohlberg “fashions women out of masculine cloth, (p. 6) effectively devaluing, even effacing, women’s moral thinking, causing it to “fall (right) through the sieve” (p. 31).

The very traits that have traditionally defined the ‘goodness’ of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development. The infusion of feeling into their judgments keeps them from developing a more independent and abstract ethical conception in which concern for others derives from principles of justice rather than from compassion and care. (Gilligan, 1977, p. 484)

Besides making women’s moral reasoning appear to be undeveloped, and women themselves immature and childlike,⁸ Kohlberg’s account of moral development ignores women’s desires and forms of action. Women, generally speaking, treat situations and human character as fluid, pay attention to the feelings of the people involved, work out solutions to dilemmas that all would find acceptable, and favor more consultative forms of deliberation. In short, they articulate their moral dilemmas in “a different voice.” Gilligan speaks of a “voice” as opposed to a “position” because, as she states at the very beginning of her account, she is interested in listening to the “stories” that women tell about their lives. She writes:

My interest lies in the interaction of experience and thought, in different voices and the dialogues to which they give rise, in the way we listen to ourselves and to others, in the stories we tell about our lives. (Gilligan, 1982, p. 2)

Her emphasis, therefore, is on narrative, and on the listening which that entails. Gilligan is well aware that theorists such as Kohlberg have listened to women’s stories, but, because they employed the interpretive framework of separate selves, they were forced to classify these stories as deficient and those who told them as lacking the qualities necessary for moral agency.⁹ Women’s voices will not be heard unless the criteria for moral development are expanded so as to accommodate that which marks women off as unique, but not inferior

(Gilligan, 1982). And what makes these voices different¹⁰ is their expression, not of a masculinist “ethic of justice or fairness,” grounded in the categorical imperative and a respect for an abstract moral law, but of “an ethics of care,” grounded in love, friendship, and the recognition of needs.¹¹ Gilligan proposes, therefore, that we adopt an alternative framework of interpretation in which the “relational self,” the self that is formed through relational patterns with others, particularly in the early years of childhood,¹² will figure at least as prominently as abstract principle.¹³ By so doing we shall be making it possible for women’s stories to be interpreted as genuinely moral narratives, distinct from, but every bit as moral as those based on abstract principles.

Gilligan identifies three fundamental characteristics that differentiate the *ethics of care* from the *ethics of justice or fairness*. First, it stems from a vital sense of personal imbeddedness within a web of ongoing relationships. Whereas the typical man will tend to downplay and even deny the value of intimate, particular relations, focusing instead upon relations and actions in accordance with universalizable maxims for action (that is, justice, fairness, rules, rights), the typical woman will attend more closely to the daily experiences, wants, needs, interests, aspirations, and moral dilemmas of people who are imbedded in relations and friendships that are quite fluid and which often presuppose and require a trust and imaginative engagement for which there are no rules. As a result, the moral problem arises from the tumult attendant upon relationships rather than from competing rights, and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract. This conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules (Gilligan, 1982). Second, the ethic of care is neither formal nor abstract, but is tied to concrete circumstances. Gilligan complains about “the blind willingness to sacrifice people to truth . . . [which] has always been the danger of an ethics abstracted from life” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 104). An ethics imbedded in life, on the other hand, inclines one away from the tendency to reduce morality to a matter of obedience to abstract laws or principles, but moves one instead in the direction of a preparedness to change the rules, or even to forsake entitlements, if by so doing, extremely meaningful, though faltering, human relationships stand a chance of being rehabilitated. What is more, an ethics imbedded in life inclines one to be more respectful of, and more attentive to, difference. Marilyn Friedman (in Larrabee, 1993) makes the point quite nicely:

Indeed, there is an apparent irony in the notion of personhood which underlies some philosophers' conceptions of the universalized moral duties owed to all persons. The rational nature which Kant, for example, takes to give each person dignity and to make each of absolute value and, therefore, irreplaceable, is not more than an abstract rational nature in virtue of which we are all alike. But if we are all alike in this respect, it is hard to understand why we would be irreplaceable. Our common rational nature would see to make us indistinguishable and, therefore, mutually interchangeable. Specific identity would be a matter of indifference, so far as absolute value is concerned. Yet it would seem that only in virtue of our distinctive particularity could we each be truly irreplaceable. (p. 270)

Indeed, an ethics of care highlights the importance that imagination plays in the human ability to relate to fellow human beings and in the effort to characterize the various practical problems and choices we daily confront. Third, the ethic of care is best expressed, not as a set of principles, but as the "activity of care." Morality, for the typical woman, expresses itself in activity directed at concrete, specific persons who need to be loved, cared for, shown compassion. Having themselves suffered the experience of having their ethical concerns ignored or dismissed as "irrational," women tend to be better attuned than men to the power dynamics within historically conditioned communities in which people have vested interests in trying to preserve their positions, status, and income, even if this means foisting upon women, the poor, sexual minorities, those parts of the population who either have not yet reached adulthood, or who are mentally ill or physically incapacitated. etc., the very real practical difficulties they must face daily. Quite unlike legalistic contractual thinking which stresses individual freedom and arms-length relations with others, care thinking imposes upon moral agents certain duties of benevolence toward such individuals and groups. It enforces a duty to care for and to empathize with these vulnerable members of our community. Along these lines, it treats the so-called private realm of familial and household relations as being of public significance. It recognizes that people who learn to trust and care within the realm of the home bring these virtues with them into public life as well, and that, conversely, failures in nurturance often lead to violence inside and outside the home. An angry son may become a bellicose man in a position of power who has little capacity to feel for and to respect other people. No community can afford to be indifferent to this kind of violence. Yet the ethical tradition has been insufficiently attentive to child nurturance and education.

Clearly, Gilligan's articulation of a relational subject that is the product of dialogical experiences undermines the very possibility of the autonomous, self-legislating agent. To be sure, Gilligan, in her work, does not explicitly attack the subject of modernist thought. She is not a moral philosopher; she does not define her project in terms of a deconstruction of the Enlightenment moral subject. Yet her work contributes significantly to that deconstruction. Although she comes from outside that discipline—indeed, from an empirical rather than a philosophical discipline—her work has had a profound effect on moral theory. This in itself should not be surprising. As Michel Foucault observes, epistemological shifts necessarily originate on the fringes of intellectual life, from its periphery, not its center; it is outsiders, not insiders, who articulate new paradigms. Indeed, the revolutionary impact of Gilligan's work is a function of her status outside the tradition of moral theory. The point, however, is that if Gilligan is right, that is, if women's "different voice" of care, responsibility, concern, and connection is essential to adult moral reasoning, then what has been traditionally regarded as women's defective and deficient moral judgment ought to show forth as a sign of their strength, and theorizing about morality would need to give some place to it.¹⁴

The view from Foucault

As important as Hartsock's, Smith's, and Gilligan's assertions concerning the possession by women of competencies and knowledges,¹⁵ that particularize them and distinguish them from men are to the objective of bringing new and respectful focus to bear upon women's lives, once devalued as mere housewifery, and women's behavior, once denigrated as waffling and indecisive, their assumptions concerning women's unique (and superior) ability to see, interpret, and experience the world in ways common to themselves as women but distinct from men, need also to be assessed critically. For this purpose I would propose as interlocutor the critical genealogist, Michel Foucault. For if there is anything Foucault rejects out of hand, it is the notion that anyone or any group has a special consciousness of, and ability to gain access to, and interpret "truth" or "reality."¹⁶ Whether women's "lives," "experiences," "concerns," "minds," and "psyches" operate as Hartsock, Smith, and Gilligan contend that they do, they remain intertwined with the specific power/knowledge systems that enframe them.¹⁷ Foucault (1977) speaks in this connection of "a double process," of "an epistemological 'thaw' through a refinement of power relations; a multiplication of the effects of power through the formation and accumulation of new forms of knowledge" (p. 224). He,

therefore, would take issue with the variants Gilligan and Smith appear to be developing, with the argument, as old as Western civilization itself, that it is possible to attribute fixed, cross-cultural characteristics to masculine and feminine identities. Gilligan, we have seen, equates autonomy, discontinuity, and aloneness with domination and maleness, and relation, intimacy, and care with “mothering” and femaleness.¹⁸ Smith (1987), for her part, writes:

[While] we began with our experiences as women, we were always returning to ourselves and to each other as *subjects in our bodies* . . . *the sexed body* was always the *common ground* in relation to which we could find ourselves with each other as *women*. (p 89)

Gilligan and Smith would appear, from Foucault's perspective, to be deploying a theoretical device which could only bring trouble, namely, the reduction, by means of the single-minded focus on a woman's culture of self-sacrifice, nurture, service, affection, and love, of an otherwise very complex and contradictory set of social relations, to simple, unified, and undifferentiated wholes, variously called *femininity*, *woman's culture*, *woman's standpoint*, which then are expected to serve as fixed, self-explanatory, universal categories of analysis.¹⁹ For as genealogical analysis demonstrates, it is under the weight, precisely, of the notion that men find their greatest fulfillment in the public sector by minding politics and cultivating reason and that women realize themselves best in domesticity by caring for their families and nurturing the deepest and most resonant affective relationships within them,²⁰ that women's domestic and reproductive “enslavement,” their implication in forms of social organization that exploit and devalue them, is most often sealed.²¹ Rachel T. Hare-Mustin and Jeanne Marecek, for example, afford us a glimpse into the complexity surrounding the issue that Foucault would have us understand when they propose that rationality as a male quality, and relatedness as a female quality, have a lot less to do with gendered bodies and women's free and deliberate espousal of a sexual romanticism based on intimate bonding, nurturance, and fidelity, than with such pressing socio-political issues as women's unique vulnerability to violence, to unwanted pregnancies, to social stigma. They write:

Men's propensity to reason from principles might stem from the fact that principles were formulated to promote their interests; women's concern with relationships can be understood as a need to please others that arises from lack of power. Typically, those in power advocate rules, discipline, control, and rationality

while those without power espouse relatedness and compassion. Thus, in husband-wife conflicts, husbands call on rules and logic, whereas wives call on caring. But, when women are in the dominant position, as in parent-child conflicts, they emphasize rules while their children appeal for sympathy and understanding and relatedness or for exceptions based on special circumstances. This suggests that rationality and relatedness are not gender-linked traits, but rather stances evoked by one's position in a social hierarchy.²² (Hare-Mustin and Marecek, 1994, p. 59)

But even as feminists understand that unitary assumptions about female identity must be broken down if the many facets of difference (gender, race, class, etc.) are ever to be dealt with squarely,²³ they worry that such deconstructive maneuvering could diminish, and even bring about the loss of feminism's political force. They worry that the failure to assert the category *woman* could mean the dissipation of any authority for their statements. They are suspicious of the fact that just when they are finally breaking their silence, rejecting their object status within dominant discourses, and constructing oppositional political subjectivities and visions which they can call their own, they are being told that sexual difference, sexual identity, and sexuality itself are fictions, and that perpetuating such categories only enhances the workings of the power that would dominate them. They argue that the rejection of emancipatory theories, the decision not to envision alternative orders, and the refusal to privilege any one discourse above another, deprive women of the basis for making any claims against a sexist society.²⁴ But because these happen to be features of Foucault's analysis, as effective as his work has been for getting them to think through the contingency of power relations, they hesitate to swim into his ken. Indeed, in view of the centrality in Foucault's work of a local micro-politics of resistance, as opposed to the identification of global structures of domination, they accuse him of "mak[ing] the question of women's oppression obsolete" (Martin, 1982). Nancy Hartsock, for one, argues that the lack of a sense of social structures in Foucault's model of power, as well as his suspicion of thought based on stable entities and unambiguous power relations, is both an inadequacy in his theory and an indication of the danger which his work poses to feminism, insofar as it leaves feminism without the resources it needs to identify patterns—in contradistinction to mere coincidences—of repeated domination and discrimination affecting women. She further alleges that Foucault's ascending analysis of power leads him to victim-blaming, by highlighting the participation of female agents in their

own oppression. "Systematically unequal power relations," she tells us, "ultimately vanish from his work."

His stress on heterogeneity and the specificity of each situation leads him to lose track of social structures and instead to focus on how individuals experience and exercise power. Individuals, he argues, 'are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power'. . . . With this move Foucault has made it very difficult to locate domination, including domination in gender relations. (Foucault, 1972a, p. 169)

Notwithstanding Foucault, feminists believe there are many good reasons for not hastening to abandon the category "woman." For however much it makes sense to question its history and its use, they are convinced that it remains a real and politically powerful category. Denise Riley (1988), for instance, observes that while generalizations about gender can and do in fact obscure and exclude, "because of its drive toward a political massing together of women, feminism can never wholeheartedly dismantle (the category of) 'women's experience'" (p. 100). Women must, politically speaking, continue to speak as and for women. Surely that is the way in which representational politics operates, particularly in societies where lobbying efforts are virtually impossible without some recourse to identity politics. For completely strategic ends, therefore, "it is compatible to suggest that "women" don't exist—while maintaining a politics of "as if they existed"—since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did" (p. 112).

Sometimes it will be a soundly explosive tactic to deny, in the face of some thoughtless depiction, that there are any "women." But at other times, the entrenchment of sexed thought may be too deep for this strategy to be understood and effective. So feminism must be agile enough to say, "Now we will be 'women'—but now we will be persons, not these 'women.'" And, in practice, what sounds like rigid opposition—between a philosophical correctness about the indeterminacy of the term, and a strategical willingness to clap one's feminist hand over one's theoretical mouth and just get on with 'women' where necessary—will loosen. . . . [This is] what makes feminism . . . a willingness, at times, to shred this "women" to bits—to develop speed, foxiness, versatility . . . [W]hile it's impossible to

thoroughly be a woman, it is also impossible never to be one. On such shifting sands, feminism must stand and sway. Its situation in respect of the sexed categories recalls Merleau-Ponty's description of another powerful presence: 'There is no outstripping of sexuality any more than there is any sexuality enclosed within itself. No one is saved and no one is totally lost.'²⁵ (Riley, 1988, p. 100, 112-113)

Yet is this not to say that the question of *woman*, like all questions of meaning, is one of negotiating a path between always particularized, localized, specified, and, therefore, impure subject positions, each one reflecting not only gender identities, but also heterogeneous and heteronomous intersections of gender, race, class, language, culture that neither presuppose nor fix their constitutive subjects in place? One would not be simply and essentially a *woman*, or a *mother*, or a *nurturing female*,²⁶ but also Asian, middle-class, a trained philosopher, a lesbian, a socialist, a mother, etc., and a combination of these in spaces, events, and circumstances, that endlessly fade in and out of focus, and are always a question of degree, depending on the shifts in agents' practices and affiliations.²⁷ Such an understanding of the multiple axes of "feminine" identity, of its character as a contested terrain, as the site of multiple and conflicting claims is, in my view, consistent with Foucault's own efforts to counterpoise to the invariant concepts of identity which characterize modernity, a conception of identity as fragmented and dynamic, and always open to change and contestation.²⁸ Indeed, among the many familiar tasks to which Foucault sets himself is the "critical ontology of ourselves," that is, "the historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, and saying." (Foucault cited in Rabinow, 1984, p. 45-46, p. 50). This, in turn, opens up possibilities for the transgression of these boundaries, and of creating new types of subjective experience.

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, or even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (Foucault cited in Rabinow, 1984, p. 50)

Indeed, Foucault's "critical ontology of ourselves," defined and understood as the interrogation and deconstruction, not of the practice of assuming complex subject positions, but of the epistemological move to ground this practice in a foundational subject²⁹ corresponds quite well to feminist conceptions of the subject as positionality, defined and understood in terms of the capacity and flexibility to act politically.³⁰ By favoring more fluid and more partial identities, Foucault quite deliberately positions himself in the political arena where "the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations, is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence" (Foucault in Dreyfuss & Rabinow, 1982, p. 221).³¹ The trouble, as he sees it, with the search for a natural sexuality is its refusal to understand that gender construction involves considerably more than fragmentation and separation, that it is a complex construction involving historically specific and multiple axes of identity. To fail to see it this way is to fail to overcome an anti-political vision, to prefer extra-political terms and practices, or "truth . . . over politics," "certainty and security . . . over freedom," "discoveries (science) over decisions (judgments)" (quoted by Sawicki in Gutting, 1994, p. 302).³² It is to fail to "take responsibility." On the other hand, to "take responsibility" is

to firmly situate ourselves within contingent and imperfect contexts, to acknowledge differential privileges of race, gender, geographic location, and sexual identities, and to resist the delusory and dangerous recurrent hope of redemption to a world not of our own making . . . to learn to make claims on our own and others' behalf and to listen to those which differ from ours, knowing that ultimately there is nothing that justifies them beyond each person's own desire and need and the discursive practices in which these are developed, embedded, and legitimated . . . [to] foster an appreciation of desire for difference, empathy, even indifference in the others. Lacking such feelings . . . all the laws and culture civilization can offer will not save us. (Flax in Butler & Scott, 1992, p. 459-60)

End Notes

¹In my essay entitled, "Feminism and Michel Foucault: A Continual Contestation," (*Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, Office for Research and Publications, Ateneo de Manila University, Vol. 1 (1997), no. 3, pp. 17-46), I argue that, while there are important theoretical affinities between Foucault's demonstrations

that sex is not an innate and innocent physical quality that must be affirmed against the manipulations of power, but is, precisely, an enactment of power, and feminist denunciations of the “naturalization” of binary structures which take “man” to be the measure and standard of all legitimated practice and discourse, and “woman,” his opposite and negation, there remain important theoretical differences—e.g. Foucault’s reluctance to take up what for feminists is a major concern, namely, the relationship between the normalizing operations of modern institutional regimes of surveillance and discipline and the production of gendered bodies. In this essay, I explore some of the ways in which, presently, and notwithstanding Foucault’s reservations, that feminist concern is played out.

²Because it is impossible, in the brief span of this essay, to address the multi-faceted effort within feminist writing to rehabilitate and re-valorize elements—such as the “emotional,” “particular,” “irrational,” “domestic,” etc.—of women’s experiences hitherto viewed by the wider culture as defective or deficient, in one way or another, my own consideration of this material will necessarily be brief. The interested reader, therefore, would do well to examine the literature himself or herself, as indicated in the footnotes.

³To be fair, Hartsock recognizes the limitations of Marx’s thinking. She admits that “on the specific question of the ways power is gendered . . . Marxian theory can be of little direct help” (cf. Hartsock, 1985, p. 118, 116, 118, 145).

⁴Indeed, the ruling class men who organize social scientific inquiry view women’s activity as not real human activity—that is, self-chosen and consciously willed—but only as natural activity, an instinctual labor of love.

⁵Experience taken by itself, however, is not enough. Smith is not interested in reproducing the subject’s actual experience, that is, in “substituting the analysis, the perspective and views of subjects, for the investigation by the sociologist” (p. 160). Although inquiry must begin with the everyday world of people’s actual activities, she recognizes that these activities will nonetheless be organized extra-locally. She writes: “The end product is not of course intended to be private. . . . Rather, the approach . . . offers something comparable to consciousness raising. Perhaps indeed it is a form of it, aiming to find the objective correlates of what had seemed a private experience of oppression. Like consciousness raising it is also to be shared” (p. 154). For this reason Smith finally turns to empirical social science. That is, she finally turns to a professional or institutionalized knowledge, the location of which, if local, somehow also is extra-local, beyond what even women see from the standpoint of their everyday life. As Smith puts it: “Though women are indeed the expert practitioners of their everyday world, the notion of the everyday world as problematic assumes that disclosure of the extra-local determinations of our experience does not lie within the scope of everyday practices. We can see only so much without specialized investigation, and the latter should be the sociologists’ special business” (p. 161).

⁶Kohlberg quite explicitly makes this point in a definition which he gives of the sixth (and highest) stage: "Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons" (Kohlberg, 1980, p. 59).

⁷The paradigm for this, of course, is Immanuel Kant's self-legislating moral subject, for whom the most distinctive thing about ethical reasoning lies not in any effort at consultation with others, but in the ability to deploy quasi-mathematical approaches in stating, defending, and applying universal principles.

⁸Kant excludes women and idiots from the moral sphere.

⁹Indeed, feminists argue, virtually alone among the branches of intellectual life, moral philosophy and moral psychology have remained resistant to efforts to replace its modernist, Enlightenment conception of "man" as rational, abstract, and autonomous, with a conception of human being emphasizing particularity, concreteness, the constitution of human being by language, culture, discourse, history (check out modern literary theory, deconstruction, cultural anthropology, and relational psychology). Moral philosophy and moral psychology, they charge, constitute a late bastion of the masculinist modernist subject. The notable exception is Erik Erikson, who asserted that women's development is "different" from that of men, but then went on to show little interest in defining the difference.

¹⁰The implication of saying that the (feminine) "voice" differs fundamentally from (masculine) "vision" seems to be that women tend to associate knowing more with speaking and listening than with seeing. Whereas (masculine) vision lends itself to stages, steps, positions, and levels, marking differences with fixed boundaries, voice establishes connections across space; (feminine) voice as voice is less positional and more interactive, relating two *subjects*, speaker and listener, as opposed to a subject and object, seer and seen.

¹¹Gilligan's point is a subtle one. On the one hand, she wants to say her argument goes no further than the claim that the moral domain must be extended to include care and responsibility, concern and connection with other people. On the other hand, she also notes that the focus on care and concern for others "is characteristically a female phenomenon in the advantaged populations that have been studied" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 330).

¹²Drawing on the work of Chodorow (1978), Gilligan describes the way in which girls, because they are not encouraged to separate from their mothers, develop a sense of self in which relationships are primary. Boys, by contrast, because they succeed in separating from their mothers, develop a sense of self as separate and autonomous. Thus, as a result of their differing relationships with their mothers, girls

develop relational skills and find autonomy problematic, while boys fear relationships but develop autonomy skills.

Turning for a moment to Chodorow herself, to account for the reproduction of mothering across cultures and over time as a female-associated activity, she eschews the usual biologicistic (that it is an innate or instinctive drive) or “social constructionist” (that it is a socially constructed and validated feminine gender role that women are socialized into assuming) explanations, drawing special attention instead to the societal arrangement according to which the care of infants, up until at least the pre-Oedipal stage, is provided almost exclusively by their mothers. It is her contention that the different and asymmetrical relationships that boys and girls have with their mothers *as infants* provide the key to understanding why women experience a deep psychological inclination to their mothers, whereas men are not so inclined. She argues, in this connection, that a (male) infant’s mother’s awareness of his sexual distinctiveness from herself prods the infant “into an oedipally toned relationship (with her) *defined by its sexuality and gender distinction*” (Chodorow, 1978, p. 107, my emphasis). The pre-Oedipal male infant’s developing sense of bodily integrity develops, therefore, under the impact of his dawning awareness that his body is very different from his mother’s, indeed, that he is “not-mother” or “not-woman”—an awareness that, during the Oedipal stage of the boy’s development, receives a boost in the form of the boy’s recognition of a generalized social contempt for the female sex represented by his mother, and a corresponding social valorization of the male sex, that is, his own. Under the impact of this recognition, the boy represses those qualities inside himself which he takes to be feminine, and rejects and devalues women and whatever he considers to be feminine in the social world.

On the other hand, in what concerns the female infant, Chodorow notes that as a consequence of the fact that she is not prodded into a relationship with her mother that is as oedipally toned and defined by sexuality as it is for her male counterpart, the female infant can remain, throughout the pre-Oedipal phase of development, in a state of “prolonged symbiosis” or “narcissistic over-identification” with her mother. And although this symbiosis with her mother is weakened during the Oedipal stage of the girl’s development by her attempts to seek the autonomy and independence which her father symbolizes for her, it never is really broken. Indeed, although the girl develops “important oedipal attachments to her father as well as to her mother, these attachments and the way they are internalized, are built upon, and do not replace, her intense and exclusive pre-oedipal attachment to her mother and its internalized counterpart” (Chodorow, 1978, p. 127). The girl’s, and later the woman’s, sense of herself is never, therefore, one of complete separation from her mother. And because a girl’s primary bond is with her mother, by the time she is old enough to make choices about anything—let alone about something as fundamental as a gender role—she has already been implanted with the desire to preserve her sense of continuity, dependence, attachment, and symbiosis with her mother—principally and ultimately

by becoming a mother herself. As Chodorow puts it, a woman “to some degree and on some unconscious or conscious level” views herself as “maternal” (Chodorow, 1978, p. 32).

The fact that girls’ early experiences involve similarity and attachment to their mothers, while boys’ early experiences emphasize difference, separateness, and independence is, in Chodorow’s view, not without implication for gender differences in adulthood with respect to identity, personality structure, and psychic needs. On the one hand, because a more rigorous individuation from the mother is demanded of the boy, he grows up tending to see social relationships as potentially threatening to his sense of self and autonomy. This prepares him for work as an adult in the public sphere, which values single-minded efficiency, a down-to-business attitude, and competitiveness. Chodorow also argues that because the masculine role models of the young boy are more likely than not to be absent and distant figures, he acquires his knowledge of masculinity in a much more removed and abstract manner than young girls acquire knowledge of femininity. Hence, abstract norms and rules play a greater role in the development of male gender identity than in the development of female gender identity. This also leads males to focus the discussion of morality around issues of justice, fairness, rules, and rights. The young girls, on the contrary, incline toward defining themselves in terms of their connection to others.

¹³Gilligan compares how boys and girls respond to the following scenario: Heinz, a man with a very sick wife, needs a certain drug to save her life. Heinz cannot afford this drug and the local druggist refuses to sell it to him at a lower price. Jake, a youthful male participant in Gilligan’s study, sees the ethical dilemma as one of logically working out which right should trump when they come into conflict. Jake argues for Heinz’s right to steal the drug. The right of Heinz’s wife to live takes precedence over the druggist’s right to make \$1,000 from the sale of this drug. Amy, by contrast, argues that Heinz should not steal the drug. She locates the ethical issue in the quality of Heinz’s relation with his wife. If he steals the drug and has to go to jail, his wife might be abandoned and be worse off than before he stole to help her. Furthermore, Amy wants Heinz and the druggist to converse with one another. She assumes that every person has a voice that deserves to be heard and that through conversation the two parties can arrive at some other mutually acceptable arrangement. Claire, an older participant, reasons like Amy. She equates “responsibility with the need for response that arises from the recognition that others are counting on you and that you are in a position to help.” Gilligan applauds the young women’s recognition that they are connected with others and need to care for that connection in their actions. According to Gilligan, their reasoning qualifies as ethically good—a genuine ethic—because it respects individuals in all their particularity. Heinz does not need to apologize for trying to meet his wife’s needs. It is only right that he do so because it is in our relations with intimates that we have the most opportunity to exhibit caring.

¹⁴It ought to be mentioned that Gilligan draws heavily upon Nancy Chodorow's argument that as a consequence of their pre-Oedipal upbringing by women, women tend to cultivate a concept of themselves as "connected" to others, whereas men see themselves as autonomous and separate from others.

¹⁵Such "knowledges" exemplify, in a sense, the insurrection of what Foucault has termed "subjugated knowledges" He writes: "By subjugated knowledges I mean the historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systematization . . . naive knowledges located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. . . . *It is through the reemergence of these low-ranking knowledges. . . . particular, local, regional knowledges. . . . which owe their force only to the harshness with which they are opposed by everything surrounding them. . . . that criticism performs its work*" (Foucault, 1972b, 81-82, my emphasis).

¹⁶On the subject of a liberatory feminist standpoint offering a "truer" science of empirical reality than a traditional masculinist one, Morgan (1984), in *Sisterhood is Global*, sounds a similar note: "Our emphasis is on the individual voice of a woman speaking not as an official representative of her country, but rather *as a truth-teller, with an emphasis on reality as opposed to rhetoric*" (p. xvi, my emphasis). Morgan quite simply assumes that woman's experience of suffering and victimization has prepared her to enter into a special relationship with "the real" or "the true."

¹⁷This is something which early radical feminist groups understood, which used the idea of "women's perspective" in the context of political organization and consciousness raising groups. To be fair, Smith's (and Hartssock's) decision to take the everyday world of women's actual activities as their point of departure is deeply rooted in early feminist notions of personal politics. Smith (1987) writes: "It is the individual's working knowledge of her everyday world that provides the beginning of the inquiry. The end product is not, of course, intended to be private [but] ... like consciousness raising it is also to be shared" (p. 154). But as feminist discourse has become increasingly drawn into what Barbara Christian calls the "race for theory" (Christian, 1988, pp. 67-69), the practical politics that was an obvious feature of the original notion of "standpoint" has been displaced by what Fraser and Nicholson describe as "an overly grandiose and totalizing conception of theory" (Fraser & Nicholson in Nicholson, 1989, p. 35).

¹⁸The primary research on which Gilligan's book, *In A Different Voice*, rests is a study of twenty nine women—and only women—confronting a decision about abortion, and, therefore, about "mothering" or the refusal of it. Describing the model of female development she offers in response to Kohlberg's model, Gilligan writes: "(It) signals a new understanding of the connection between self and others which is articulated by the concept of responsibility. The elaboration of this concept of responsibility and its *fusion with a maternal morality* that seeks to ensure care for the

dependent and unequal characterizes the . . . perspective . . . (whereby) the good is equated with caring for others” (p. 74).

¹⁹Citing an extensive body of empirical studies, Travis notes that “research in recent years casts considerable doubt on the notion that men and women differ appreciably in their moral reasoning, or that women have a permanently different voice because of their early closeness to their mothers. . . . When subsequent research directly compared men’s and women’s reasoning about moral dilemmas, Gilligan’s ideas have rarely been supported. In study after study, men and women use both care-based reasoning . . . and justice-based reasoning. In study after study, researchers report no average differences in the kind of moral reasoning that men and women apply . . . results confirm Gilligan’s argument that people make moral decisions not only according to abstract principles of justice but also according to principles of compassion. . . .” Two other psychologists in the field of moral development, Anne Colby and William Damon, likewise found little scientific support for Gilligan’s claims. “While her portrayal of general, sex-linked life-orientations is intuitively appealing, “ they concluded, “the research evidence at this point does not support such a generalized distinction” (Travis, 1992, pp. 83-86).

²⁰Jean Grimshaw calls attention to the complexity of the relationship between male experience and female experience when she writes: “The experience . . . of being a man or a woman inflects much if not all of people’s lives. . . . But even if one is always a man or a woman, one is never just a man or a woman. One is young or old, sick or healthy, married or unmarried, a parent or not a parent, employed or unemployed, middle class or working class, rich or poor, black or white, and so forth. Gender, of course, inflects one’s experience of these things, so the experience of any one of them may well be radically different according to whether one is a man or a woman. *But it may also be radically different according to whether one is, say, black or white or working class or middle class.* The relationship between male and female experience is a very complex one. Thus there may in some respects be more similarities between the experience of factory labor for example, or of poverty and unemployment—than between a working-class woman and a middle-class woman—and experiences of domestic labor and childcare, of the constraints and requirements that one be ‘attractive,’ or ‘feminine,’ for example” (Grimshaw, 1986, pp. 84-85, my emphasis).

²¹Some feminists have argued that the family is not and has never been a particularly safe place for women and children; that most of the violence perpetrated against them occurs within the family, as does sexual abuse. For instance, see Bell (1993) and Singer (1993). Conversely, women, as mothers, can foster relationships with their children that are as oppressive as any other social relation. Or they could act in nurturing roles even as they socialize young children as parents or educators to believe that might makes right. Abundant evidence exists, for instance, of the commitment to fascism on the part of housewives’ organizations in Weimar and Nazi Germany; of the German feminist movement’s abandonment of Jewish members to

their fate; of the support for Nazi eugenics by the organization of German Women Doctors which quickly moved to expel its own Jewish members (cf. Bridenthal, Grossmann, & Kaplan, 1984).

²²See also R. T. Hare-Mustin and J. Marecek (1986). Others note that the idea of woman as an emotional nurturer is historically specific. Jean Grimshaw, for one, contends that such an idea was foreign to the ancient Greeks (cf. Grimshaw, 1986, p. 63). Charles Taylor demonstrates that the accent in philosophical writing on relations is not unique to the feminist preserve. Indeed, prior to the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, European men conceived of the universe as “a great chain of being,” connected rather than atomistic, necessarily related to humanity, in contradistinction to being “a neutral domain of facts, of contingently related elements, the tracing of whose co-relations will enable greater and greater manipulation and control of the world” (Taylor, 1985, p. 134).

²³Teresa De Laurentis, for example, writes: “Woman is a totality of qualities, properties, and attributes that feminists define, envisage, or enact for themselves . . . and possibly also wish for other women. This is more a project, then, than a description of existent reality; it is an admittedly feminist project of ‘re-vision,’ where the specifications feminist and re-vision already signal its historical location, even as the (re)vision projects itself outward geographically and temporally (universally) to recover the past and to claim the future. This may be utopian, idealist, perhaps misguided or wishful thinking, it may be a project one does not want to be a part of, but it is not essentialist as is the belief in a God-given or otherwise immutable nature of woman” (De Laurentis in Schor & Weed, 1994, p. 3).

²⁴This fear is expressed by Soper (1990), who writes: “Feminism, like any other politics, has always implied a banding together, a movement based on the solidarity and sisterhood of women, who are linked by perhaps very little else than their sameness and ‘common cause’ as women. If this sameness itself is challenged on the ground that there is no ‘presence’ of womanhood, nothing that the term ‘woman’ immediately expresses, and nothing instantiated concretely except particular women in particular situations, then the idea of a political community built around women—the central aspiration of the early feminist movement—collapses” (pp. 11-17).

²⁵Gayatri Spivak makes the same point when she writes: “I think it is absolutely on target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism . . . but strategically we cannot. Even as we talk about feminist practice, or privileging practice over theory, we are universalizing. Since the moment of essentializing, universalizing, saying yes to the onto-phenomenological question is irreducible, let us at least situate it at the moment; let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counterproductive gesture of repudiating it” (Spivak & Grosz, 1984-85, p. 184). Donna Haraway proposes, a politics based on “affinities” or political kinship. She writes: “From the perspective of cyborgs, freed of the need to ground politics in ‘our’ privileged position of the oppression that incorporates all other

dominations, the innocence of the merely violated, the ground of those closer to nature, we can see powerful possibilities. . . . With no available original dream of a common language or original symbiosis promising protection . . . to recognize 'oneself' as fully implicated in the world, frees us of the need to root politics in identification, vanguard parties, purity, and mothering" (Haraway, 1991, pp. 156, 176).

²⁶It should be mentioned that when mothering is represented as the high point and goal of womanly existence, the growing number of women who do not define or understand themselves in such terms automatically feel excluded from the category of "true womanhood." Soper (1990) registers an especially trenchant criticism of this: "It is particularly offensive and arrogant—to the point in fact of operating a kind of theft of subjectivity or betrayal of all those who fail to recognize themselves in the mirror it offers" (p. 15).

²⁷Fraser and Nicholson (1989) favor developing a commitment to feminist pluralism, to the ideal of a "tapestry composed of threads of many different hues . . . as opposed to one woven in a single color" (p. 35).

²⁸Apropos to the foregoing considerations, Delia Aguilar (in Visvanathan, Duggan, & Nisonoff, 1997) argues that in the Philippines, "feminism [is] at the crossroads." She writes: "Instead of the essential woman, we are confronted by subjectivities that are fragmentary, multiple, contradictory, and in constant flux. To the singular focus on gender has been added a list of other forms of oppression—racism, classism, homophobia, ableism, etc.—all of which are mutually determining and none of which supersedes the others in importance. The meaning of 'woman,' then, is now constantly deferred and never fully established since this depends on how gender intersects with multiple other axes at any given moment. With this new scheme called the 'politics of difference,' our attention is now turned to the local and specific, the focus being on the personal, the subjective, the everyday. One might conclude that, at last, the 60s' challenge to politicize the personal has been met and consummated. Maybe so, but L.A. Kauffman argues that the present vision informing identity politics deviates from that of the 60s. At that time, consciousness-raising groups became the principal method through which women exchanged personal stories and attempted to arrive at the underlying social forces that would explain what they discovered to be shared everyday realities. Whereas consciousness raising then stressed the social nature of individual experience and was seen as a prelude to political change, today self-transformation is itself political change. It cannot be otherwise since the earmark of current feminist approaches is the rejection of a cosmic view adopted from postmodernism. . . . So what does all this mean for us Filipino women? To be sure, the emphasis on heterogeneity and pluralism connotes a refreshing acceptance of experiences that are eclipsed by posing women as a unitary group. But the problem is that relations of power are hidden by the stringing together of a series of oppressions, mutually defining though these may be, in the end insuring the preservation of things as they

are. How will such a stance assist us in ridding ourselves of our colonial predisposition toward self-erasure if power relations are concealed? . . . If the above is true, then maybe it is not too bad that Filipino feminists have not yet discovered the ‘politics of difference’. . . . [T]he idea that power is diffuse . . . sidesteps the predatory nature of a system based on the maximization of profit and its continued reliance on the power of the state. Such formulations often manage to blur the power plays that continually transpire among particular nation-states, in effect projecting the illusion of equal ineffectuality in the face of transnational corporate might. . . . Surely we need to worry about authoritarianism in our progressive movement, but is it grand narratives that are responsible for this? Without an overarching framework, how can we begin to grasp the shape of capitalism or any other social formation? Not knowing the nature of the social system we live in, how can we begin to work for change? Can we afford a retreat from political struggle, which is what this trend of thought ultimately implies? . . . I would argue that developments in the Philippines as well as in the international arena warrant a feminism that is vehemently anti-colonial and staunchly nationalist. It is time to reinscribe nationalism into the feminist agenda” (pp. 315-317).

²⁹“Modern man,” Foucault asserts, “is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not ‘liberate man in his own being’; it compels him to face the task of producing himself” (cf. Rabinow, p. 42).

³⁰Linda Alcoff suggests adopting a strategic approach that simultaneously uses and questions the category *woman*, which she describes as a position from which a feminist politics can emerge rather than a set of attributes that are ‘objectively identifiable’: “If we combine the concept of identity politics with a conception of the subject as positionality, we can conceive of the subject as non-essentialized and emergent from a historical experience and yet retain our political ability to take gender as an important point of departure. Thus we can say at one and the same time that gender is not natural, biological, universal, a-historical, or essential, and yet still claim that gender is relevant because we are taking gender as a position from which to act politically. . . . In becoming feminist, women take up a position, a point of perspective, from which to interpret or (re)construct values and meanings. That position is also a politically assumed identity, and one relative to a socio-historical location, whereas essentialist definitions would have woman’s identity or attributes independent of her external situation; however, the positions available to women in any socio-historical location are neither arbitrary nor undecidable. Thus, Alcoff concludes: “If we combine the concept of identity politics with a conception of the subject as positionality, we can conceive of the subject as non-essentialized and emergent from a historical experience and yet retain our political ability to take gender as an important point of departure. Thus we can say at one and the same time that gender is not natural, biological, universal, a-historical, or essential, and yet still claim that gender is relevant because

we are taking gender as a position from which to act politically” (Alcoff, 1988, pp. 433-435).

³¹Foucault’s linkage of self-transformation with wider political transformation is prefigured in his study of the ethical practices in ancient Greece, where the flourishing of individuality rested in some way upon its subordination to the demands of the *polis*. For instance, the exercise of self-mastery in sexual relations was defined and understood in terms not only of the increase of desire and pleasure, but also of the cultivation of citizenly virtue: “The individual’s attitude towards himself, the way in which he ensured his own freedom with regard to himself, and the form of supremacy he maintained over himself were a contributing element to the well-being and good order of the city” (Foucault, 1985, p. 79).

³²A feminist politics that is consistent with Foucault’s program is one that would seek to understand, analyze, and oppose the patterns of male dominance and female oppression that characterize a particular society in a specific historical context. Feminists, after all, cannot resist patriarchy as a universal phenomenon. But by carrying out an analysis of male dominance that is local and contextual, they can resist specific instances of patriarchy, they can oppose specific patriarchal structures.

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